

David Gillison

Born 1936, Melbourne, Victoria

Artist, photographer, conservationist and educator

Gillison graduated from the Art School of the National Gallery of Victoria with a Diploma of Fine Art.

Following his award of the NGV Triennial Travelling Scholarship, David undertook postgraduate studies at the Slade School of Fine Art, London and in the US and Japan. While at the Slade he apprenticed as a lithographer with the Curwen Studio under Stanley Jones and assisted the production of portfolios of leading European and English artists. Later he was a visiting artist and instructor at the Hammersmith College of Art, London. In the United States at Virginia he studied and worked with the Kobo Group (a Japanese design collective). In Japan, he studied ceramics and painting with faculty from the *Kyoto Bijitsu Daigaku* (Fine Arts University) and lived and worked in a mountain community of painters and potters outside Kyoto. He was also a research fellow with Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai (Organisation for International Culture).

In 1969 Gillison joined the Art Department of Lehman College, City University, New York (CUNY). He also studied photography at the School of Visual Arts, NY and at workshops at the University of Pennsylvania in ethnographic photography with the Life Magazine photographer Elliot Elisofon.

Gillison travelled in 1973 to the Crater Mountain region of Papua New Guinea to study sources of visual imagery in ethnographic art. After this two-year immersion in the culture of the Gimi people in Crater, Gillison returned to teach full-time in CUNY where he is a professor.

He has made many visits since to new Guinea with the support of the Wildlife Conservation Society (formerly New York Zoological Society) exploring the relationship between nature and art among the Gimi. These studies led to efforts to conserve the flora and fauna of the Crater Mountain area.

When Gillison's guides in the Crater Mountain region of Papua New Guinea became aware of his interest in the sources of their ritual imagery they insisted that he accompany them on hunting trips deep into the forests so that he could learn why the flora and fauna were so important in their ritual imagery. Following a series of treks Gillison asked Kwipaba, a friend and guide, to find him a lek (a group of displaying male birds) of the Princess Stephanie bird of paradise.

Once found, he observed, drew and photographed these extraordinary birds. However, with the death of Kwipaba's son, the lek was killed off and sold to raise money to pay for the boy's death rites. After this Gillison began a non-binding partnership with Kwipaba and a group of Crater landowners to find a way to preserve birds of paradise while evolving an income for the landowners other than from the sale of bird of paradise plumes.

This ad hoc relationship of Gimi Big-men, artists, photographers, biologists, a couple of helicopter pilots, joined by the Wildlife Conservation Society, has led to the formation of The Research and Conservation Foundation of Papua New Guinea. In turn, three thousand square kilometres of the Crater Mountain wilderness have been recognised by the government of Papua New Guinea as a reserve.

Awards

These include:

- The National Gallery of Victoria Triennial Travelling Scholarship;
- Dyason Awards from the Art Gallery of NSW for study in the USA and Japan;
- Visiting Fellow sponsorship of the International Cultural Foundation of Japan;
- as a Conservation Fellow with the Wildlife Conservation Society (1982 to present), research awards from The John D. and Katherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Chicago; the Art Ortenberg-Liz Claiborne Foundation, New York; and the Biodiversity Conservation Network (USAID), Washington. These funds were used to support WCS's conservation programs in Crater; and
- Arts Council UK, to assist a student exchange program *Surfing the Diaspora* to explore the life networks of 'trans-located' peoples.

Exhibitions and publications

From the late 1960's through the 1980's Gillison exhibited large colour-field paintings and screens (first in Melbourne at Pinacotheca, then in New York and elsewhere).

Gillison's photography has been exhibited in New York, Australia and Europe with favourable mentions from Hilton Kramer, A.D. Coleman and Andy Grundberg of the New York Times.

Published work has appeared in articles for *National Geographic Magazine*, *National Geographic Research*, *Geo Magazine* (Hamburg), *Terre Sauvage* (Paris), *Paris Match* (Paris) and numerous magazines in Italy, Japan and South America.

He is a contributing photographer with Magnum Photos, (Paris), and was featured in the May 1990 issue of *Photo Magazine* (Paris) under the title of *L'initiation du peintre*.

In 2003 he published *New Guinea Ceremonies*, a study of nature and creativity in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, with Harry N. Abrams, New York.