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Zanzabari Textile Designs Bridge Cultural Contexts in Graphics

By Mark Hardison

VCU senior Leah Schmidt studied textiles for two months in Zanzibar, Tanzania this past summer, focusing on native textile designs and traditional methods. A Graphic Design major, Schmidt was a recipient of both the VCU Arts Dean's International Study Grant and an Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program Fellowship Grant (also known as a UROP Grant). Schmidt worked alongside her faculty advisor and many local Zanzabari designers and artisans to identify the methods used in screen printing, weaving, and batik dying. She related the designs and patterns of the Zanzabari natives to those she uses in graphic design.

Schmidt said that her experience in Zanzibar was unique, and one she won't soon forget.

"I saw their designs and patterns as having a direct visual relation to many design decisions made in graphic design, although the processes were extremely different," she said. "I was interacting with the locals at the market and meeting other travelers, as well as learning Swahili."

Schmidt's initial search for a faculty advisor to assist her with her research project led her to a set of co-advisors: on-campus advisor David Shields and Karen Steen, who traveled with her. Schmidt said the most complicated part of her research was not the hands on experience she had with Zanzabari natives, but the application process for research scholarships and grants. Schmidt worked with Steen over the phone and through emails to come up with her research experiment.

"It (the application process) forced me to organize myself as a student and helped me to formulate my ideas in a more structured way, which led me to draw new conclusions about my interests as a designer," Schmidt said.



Screen Printing at moussa's workshop, made the screen out of shoe tacks and silk fabric, printed on scrap fabric.

Schmidt also said she believes she learned how to be more patient and open during her study in Zanzibar, which she said will help her in a graphic design career. Her experience came with numerous challenges and she changed the focus of her research topic several times. She said she took the opportunity during her research abroad to be open to new ideas and changes that would both better her experience with the Zanzabari fash-

ion designers and artisans as well as contribute to her research of their methods and designs.

“My research in Zanzibar also taught me how to be flexible. Going there, I had a planned idea of what my research and experience would be like. But after making new connections and finding out more about what my project could be about, I was confronted with a swarm of new ideas which challenged me to go into new directions. Not planned, but still fascinating and worthwhile,” Schmidt said.

If you are interested in research through the VCU Department of Graphic Design, please contact department chairman David Shields for more information. His contact information can be found through the VCU website.



Batik designing and laying wax at Moussa's workshop, where I spent most of my research working with him