

This Art School Aims To Narrow The Wealth Disparity In Developing Countries

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February 28, 2018

When traveling to distant places, tourists usually want to bring something back. Too often it's a kitschy knickknack: mass-produced but crafted to look handmade. Worse still, profits usually don't benefit the seller — at least not by much.

Entrepreneur Tim Reynolds was about to change all that when he met artist Anthony Waichulis. In 2011, the two established [Ani Art Academies](#), which has evolved into a group of six schools located in Anguilla, Dominican Republic, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and two in the U.S. With about 50 students total (not including graduates), the academies offer hardworking, creatively minded locals full scholarships to a three-year full-time arts program. The idea is that students and graduates produce original paintings and drawings that give travelers the opportunity to forgo souvenirs for actual investments, which in turn benefits local artists 100%.

Back in 2000, Reynolds had recently co-founded the lucrative trading firm Jane Street Capital, when a car accident left him paralyzed. "I met many newly disabled people while recovering from my injuries and, sadly, saw too many

paraplegics withdraw from the workforce and their communities,” he says. “I learned how to draw and paint many years after my accident and understand that art is a very teachable skill requiring only practice and one able hand.”

Reynolds eventually turned his focus to developing Ani Villas, a series of luxury private resorts in developing nations. (“Ani” comes from a Swahili word for “path” or “road.”) Meanwhile, his growing interest in painting led Reynolds to the work of artist Timothy W. Jahn, who in turn introduced Reynolds to Anthony Waichulis. Reynolds was intrigued with Waichulis’s unique artistic approach, which has since evolved into the Ani Art Academies curriculum.



Ani Villas in the Dominican Republic. Photo courtesy of Ani Villas.

According to Waichulis, his program has closer ties to music and language training than it does to contemporary arts education. As a youth, Waichulis took classes in both music and art and realized that the fundamentals of music remained mostly the same, regardless of instrument. “Keys, chords, arpeggios, scales, cadences — it didn’t matter if you were on a guitar or a saxophone — they held across the board,” Waichulis explains. “Art classes, however, seemed quite different. While there were indeed similarities in some of the conventions, it seemed that more of the fundamentals were governed by the aesthetic preferences and personal experiences of the instructor.”

Waichulis began to identify what he believed were the visual equivalents to the elements of music. “As such, our program starts with basic visual primitives, like dots and lines, organizes them into shapes, continues to add variables to communicate form, and ultimately yields what we would call effective percept surrogates,” he describes. “A great amount of the program is repetition — as would be expected with any effective deliberate practice schedule — that is designed to automatize low-level operations of the activity, freeing up cognitive resources for ‘higher-level’ tasks.”

It’s an intriguing system, but raises the question: Does using the same methodology across all academies diminish or enhance the cultural heritage of each destination? According to Waichulis, “One of the greatest aspects of

this endeavor is being able to see that while we do indeed hold great diversity, fundamentally we are all far more alike than we are different.”

“These are countries that each have very strong cultures that have evolved over many centuries,” Reynolds elaborates. “These students’ artistic heritage is as different as their individual personalities and that’s something I’d be ashamed to influence, even a little. We are there to teach skills, not aesthetics. If Ani Art Academy Thailand students started producing paintings that look like Western European art, then we failed horribly. If Thai students keep doing what they are doing — employing newfound skills to release their imagination and realize their wildest ideas — then it will all be worth the effort and expense.”

Anything that comes out of Ani Art Academies is a work of art that represents the discipline, vision, and creativity of a local aspiring artist. The flagship academy and training facility is Ani Academies Waichulis in northeastern Pennsylvania, located where Waichulis lives and works. Currently, there are eight teaching positions across all academies, and each teacher needs to agree to a three-year minimum commitment when accepting a post. So far, all those who’ve met the minimum length of stay have remained beyond their required tenure, according to Waichulis.



Ani Art Academy Anguilla. Photo courtesy of Ani Art Academy.

Meanwhile, Ani Art Academy America, in Red Bank, New Jersey, is a free resource for U.S. veterans and their families, with priority given to disabled veterans. “There is a sense of accomplishment and pride showing off a worthy painting, and I am confident that sense of accomplishment can help veterans feel capable, respected and valued,” Reynolds says. “Some disabled people can feel powerless or dependent, while others, with reasonable support, adjust and go on to accomplish great things. PTSD and veteran suicide is an epidemic and the VA isn’t doing their share. Art is well known to effectively combat PTSD and depression. If anyone wants to live a better life and is willing to work towards a goal, we are here for them. America has broken our promises

to assist our fallen soldiers. I think we all do what we can on the scale we can. If we don't, who will?"

For Reynolds, the goal of Ani Art Academies is to help as many people lead rewarding lives as possible, regardless of location. "People want a valuable skill and the ability to employ that skill to support themselves and their communities," he says. "There is an extreme and unacceptable wealth disparity in many tropical countries that happen to have beautiful beaches. Expensive and opulent resorts on stunning beaches coddle tourists while less than a mile away, shanties hide poverty. Tourists stay in their bubble and usually don't even see what's going on. They're not mean-hearted or selfish; there just isn't a realistic way help outside of single-use handouts. We're teaching hardworking locals how to produce something valuable to sell — a great painting to remember their 'vacation of a lifetime.' There are many ways to fight poverty but the thing is to do it with dignity and respect."

When asked about the challenges associated with operating Ani Art Academies, Reynolds responds, "Everything truly worthwhile is difficult in proportion to its merit. When we have challenges with construction, hurricanes, bureaucrats, utilities, permits, hiring, superstitions, or anything else, I remind the team: Do you know why nobody has built six free world-class art academies in five countries before? Because it's hard."

For Reynolds, the original plan for Ani Art Academies was that students and graduates would hang their art at Ani Villas and guests would buy that art, with all proceeds going to the artists. “In reality, galleries in the U.S. and other countries have seen the students’ works and sold it before it gets to the villa,” he points out. “Many pieces from the students and graduates will be featured at ‘Imagine,’ coming up at [Rehs Galleries](#) in New York City, on April 28. Rehs Galleries has sold many works of the academies’ students in the past, and I imagine this opening will be another success.”

As for the future of Ani Art Academies, Reynolds remains matter-of-fact: “We just want to make a difference. New students and applicants often ask what is expected from them in exchange for this free education. The answer is that we hope they will give back to their communities, help their fellow students, and work together. My hope is that in the future, we will have more schools and new students will toil away at their easels, daydreaming that when they make some money, they’ll do something bigger than the famous graduate that built that playground or schoolhouse in town.”