

Artistic assistance

The Sovereign Art Foundation helps disadvantaged children using the arts as rehabilitation, education and therapy. *Gillian Johnston* finds out more.

Whilst art and charity aren't often viewed together like paint and canvas, Yorkshire-born art collector Howard Bilton changed that in 2003 by establishing The Sovereign Art Foundation (SAF) in Hong Kong. Howard realised a long-held dream to use art to help disadvantaged children across the region.

Today, SAF runs a number of contemporary art competitions around the world, including two prizes in Hong Kong, one in Europe, two in the Middle East and others being established this year.

Since the inaugural Sovereign Asian Art Prize, SAF has organised 30 gala and exhibition events worldwide – 16 in Hong Kong, four in London, four in Singapore, one in Korea, one in South Africa and one each in Istanbul, Bahrain, Johannesburg and Shanghai – and, as a result, has raised in excess of US\$4.5 million for needy children.

SAF's portfolio of social responsibility projects ranges from art empowerment programmes for Vietnam's most vulnerable kids, a music and arts programme for orphaned or abandoned children in Mongolia's capital, Ulaanbaatar, creative arts healing projects for Cambodian human trafficking victims, a weekend arts programme for underprivileged Hong Kong youngsters, to a pilot project in rural Nepal raising awareness of children's rights. Often those involved are victims of human trafficking, hard labour, sexual abuse, drugs or violence. The Foundation uses art to rehabilitate, build self-confidence and encourage their return to education.



"There are countless charities out there doing incredible work for disadvantaged children by providing the basic necessities, such as food, shelter and medicine. We try to offer children something many charities don't, and that is the gift of renewed hope...and joy. Picking up a crayon or paintbrush, and losing themselves in a world of creativity is something these children deserve, but haven't been free to do in a long time. They are reminded of the simplicity and innocence of childhood, it brings a smile to their face," said Lauren Cameron, SAF's manager.

Heartwarmingly, some of the kids assisted by early projects are returning as teachers, several have established businesses, whilst others have reintegrated happily into society. "With the public's assistance we believe we have made a real difference to the communities in which we operate," Howard added.

Hunter Ho (Ho Chu Hang), a student in 2015's Make It Better Summer

Programme, feels the experience so transformed his life – physically, mentally and even spiritually – he's keen to join again this summer and recommends it to friends.

Michelle Price, journalist and volunteer, believes that the activities, arts and crafts in the Summer Programme workshop in which she was involved encouraged self-discovery, improvement and empowerment – "critical concepts for young adults that have lived most of their lives on the periphery and may suffer from feelings of exclusion or alienation".

You don't need to be artistic to transform a child's life! It's easy to donate, sponsor a workshop, become a patron or volunteer for the local Make It Better project. Visit www.SovereignArtFoundation.com or email Art@SovereignArtFoundation.com for details. Alternatively, buy a ticket or host a table at the 2016 Gala Dinner and Art Auction on 3 June.