

Creative Opportunities for Missouri's Traditional Artists

By Lisa L. Higgins

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Coggsell has been a master artist in Missouri's Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program seven times since 1992.

The role of folklorists who work in the public sector often involves far more administrative duties than fieldwork opportunities—more working with paper than working with people. Our most recent graduate student intern, Tahna Henson, explains “I have seen how fieldwork and office work truly blend together; the experience of one validates and enriches the execution of the other. It may not seem particularly enlightening to state that public sector folklorists rely on their paperwork—especially the documentation of site visits and the process of carefully completing and evaluating grant applications—to preserve and deepen their relationships with master folk artists, but this is a vital relationship, that, for [artists] and folklorists alike, requires dedication, keen minds and a great quantity of patience.”

Recently, the dedication and patience of the Folk Arts staff has been rewarded through a new opportunity from the Fund for Folk Culture (FFC), a nonprofit organization dedicated to the dynamic practice and conservation of folk and traditional arts and culture throughout the United States. In April 2007, the FFC announced the national expansion of its *Artists Support Program*, a pilot grant program for individual artists. Nominations for applicants were requested. The grants are underwritten by The Ford Foundation with additional support from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and provide opportunities for individual folk and traditional artists “to pursue activities that will help them grow artistically and professionally, better connect with their cultural communities or

develop new audiences for their work.” Anyone remotely involved in the arts knows that grants for individual artists are scarce, and such awards for folk and traditional artists are, as the old saying goes, scarcer than hen’s teeth. My favorite paperwork is providing nominations, support letters, and technical assistance when our constituents apply for grants and awards. These activities, as Henson notes, “truly blend” the work of the field and the office.

The Folk Arts staff nominated three Missouri artists for the 2007 Artists Support Program grant; seventy-five artists were nominated from fourteen states. We were delighted in October to learn that storyteller Gladys Coggsell of Frankford, Mo., was one of twenty-six artists to receive a grant. With the award, Coggsell has been working over these last few months to complete a manuscript of stories she collected along the Mississippi River that illuminate periods in Missouri’s history prior to and during the struggles for integration of African-Americans in the United States. With the assistance of *Missouri Heritage Readers Series* editor Rebecca Schroeder and Claudia Powell of Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Coggsell has completed transcriptions of the stories, provided cultural and historical contextual information, collected accompanying images, and prepared the stories for publication. The manuscript is currently under review for publication, and she expects to have copies available for sale this fall. I am honored to have been asked to write the book’s Foreword.

Understandably, the Folk Arts staff was quick to nominate three Missouri artists when the 2008 request for ASP nominations was issued in January. Folk arts specialist Debbie Bailey and I assisted all three artists with their applications, as the competition for these grants is clearly fierce. We provided feedback on applications, letters of support, and copies of images. In this latest round, only twenty-one awards were granted, with over seventy-five

applications from twelve states. All three Missouri artists devoted a great deal of time to their applications. To our great surprise, not one, but two were awarded Artists Support Program grants of almost \$5,000 each.



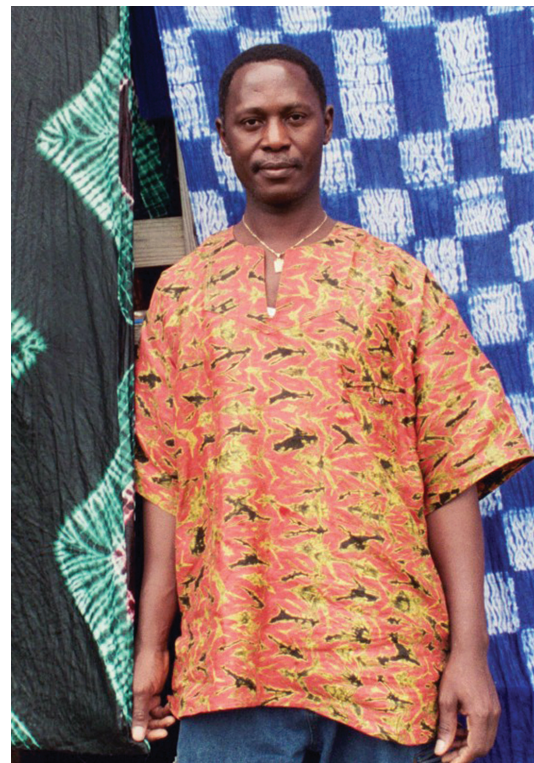
Alaadeen has been a master artist in the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program four times since 1991.

African American jazz saxophonist Ahmad Alaadeen of Kansas City, Mo., will use his grant to develop a jazz methods manual based on his personal teaching approach, which is rooted in oral tradition. The manual will be written from a performer's perspective in clear, accessible language for use by non-conservatory trained musicians. Alaadeen will also include stories that convey values, lessons learned, struggles and perseverance drawn from his sixty years of experience performing with Jay McShann and others jazz greats. The manual will be made available through an on-demand online book publishing website and distributed free to schools and local jazz organizations in the Kansas City area, where Alaadeen has been conducting youth jazz clinics for thirty-five years.

Additionally, Mandingo/Sierra Leone tie dye artist Mahmoud Conteh of St. Louis, Mo., will develop a marketing plan and website to attract and build a high-end consumer base for his clothing and traditional fabric designs. Conteh has been impeded by inadequate materials, especially dyes and chemicals. The ones available in the United States are significantly weaker than those he can purchase from Africa. The quality of his work and the final products are greatly influenced by his ability to get the best materials. Grant funds will enable Conteh to purchase supplies to increase his inventory; work with a consultant with international crafts expertise to develop a business plan; and collaborate with a website designer at the International Institute, based in St. Louis, Mo., to build an online retail outlet for his work.

At the Folk Arts program, we typically apply for two to four grants a year in order to fund the operating budget, established projects, and new initiatives. We celebrate both the grants and the funding organizations who entrust us to be good stewards. We even celebrate the paperwork that accompanies them, as we are keenly aware that providing reports allow us to assess our work, plan for the future, and provide important data to granting organizations. We are, however, a little more excited to celebrate the awards for Mrs. Cogswell, Mr. Alaadeen and Mr. Conteh. The projects will not only provide these gifted artists with creative opportunities, but financial ones as well, as they turn compelling stories, multi-faceted lessons, and vibrant materials into products for new audiences—making our paperwork all the more important and satisfying.

Please visit our online exhibition:
<http://maa.missouri.edu/mfap/workisartonline/index.html>



Conteh has been a master artist in the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program twice since 2005.