Iwanter Prize Recognizes Excellence in Undergraduate Humanities Scholarship

Recent graduate Daniel Ahrendt (B.A. ’18, History) has received the 2019 Iwanter Prize for Undergraduate Research, an annual award administered by the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Center for the Humanities. The $2,000 prize is given to a graduating senior who, through a senior thesis and general academic distinction, demonstrates outstanding humanities-based scholarship of a broad and interdisciplinary nature.

Ahrendt’s senior honors thesis, “Purchasers of Their Own ‘Kith and Kin’: Southwest Borderlands Captive-Taking and the Limits of U.S. Authority in New Mexico, 1849-1852,” seeks to uncover and understand the experiences of the many captives—most of whom were Native and ethnic Mexican women and children—who were abducted, exchanged, enslaved, and incorporated by the various other inhabitants of the mid-nineteenth-century southwest borderlands of North America.

Ahrendt found that most of the documentation of captive-taking in the Southwest was produced by Anglo men, many of whom understood little about the area and its inhabitants, while captives produced very little historical documentation about their own experiences. In order to develop an understanding of the social and cultural worlds of the various Native peoples involved in the captive trade, he incorporated enthnography and anthropology to tell a more balanced, less Eurocentric story than the travel writings and Anglo correspondence might have otherwise allowed. For Ahrendt, there is no way to approach historical work without working across disciplines. “I think most effective works of historical scholarship move fluidly across the boundaries between different sorts of information and diverse ways of knowing,” he claims, “therein revealing these boundaries to be artificial and constructed.”

Under the direction of his advisor, Professor of History and affiliate of Chican@ & Latin@ Studies and Gender & Women’s Studies Susan Lee Johnson, Ahrendt conducted original research and site visits in New Mexico while on a competitive Hilldale Fellowship. In recommending him for the prize, Professor Johnson wrote that “Daniel Ahrendt embodies the very spirit of the Iwanter Prize,” and the committee agreed that Ahrendt had produced a thesis that best represented the ideals the Iwanter Prize is intended to recognize: originality, clarity, interdisciplinarity, and scholarly depth. The committee found Ahrendt’s arguments about the legacies of captivity, on bodies, families, and even the landscape of the Southwest, were solidly evidenced and elegantly articulated.
Keqinhua Zhu (B.S. ’19, Art History and Conservation Biology) has garnered the $500 Honorable Mention prize for her honors thesis “From Global to Local: A Case Study of the Macartney Tapestry in the Reign of Emperor Qianlong, 1735-1796,” written under the direction of Professor of Chinese Art in the Department of Art History Yuhang Li. In her thesis, Zhu investigates the Macartney Tapestry, a silk tapestry depicting the moment when the Macartney Embassy (the first British diplomatic mission to China) entered Beijing in 1793.

In the summer of 2018, Zhu conducted her field research at the National Maritime Museum in London and examined the artifact very carefully. While writing her honors thesis, she discovered archival information that enabled her to situate the tapestry in the intersection of a triangular relationship between the Qing court, Chinese local officials, and the British ambassador, arguing that local officials manipulated a diplomatic event and transformed the tapestry, as an object, into a particular political symbol of the Qing empire. Her thesis offers a new view of the cultural significance of the Macartney Tapestry, as well as a case study in local officials’ reinterpretation of global events at local levels.

Having received her Bachelor of Science degree in both Art History (with honors) and Conservation Biology, Zhu finds her interdisciplinary study has allowed her to be “more systematic in handling visual and material practices,” and to see “new possibilities to connect art with science.” She will continue her studies in the fall at the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University, studying Chinese art history at the graduate level.

The Iwanter Prize was established in 2000 by alumnus Sidney E. Iwanter (B.A.’71, History), a native of the Greenbush neighborhood in Madison. Iwanter, a writer and producer who now lives in Los Angeles, continues to support the undergraduate humanities and the love of learning at UW-Madison, stemming from his belief that “a well-rounded humanities education is the keystone to an informed electorate and a healthy society.”

“I wanted to set up an award that would be virtually impossible for me, on my best day, to win,” Mr. Iwanter quips. He reads every submission, and predicts this year’s awardees may end up with a Pulitzer or a Bancroft prize one day. For now, they’ll receive Iwanter prizes, which fall along the high end of the dollar spectrum for writing and humanities scholarship awards for undergraduates. Iwanter says it’s still ‘miniscule’ compared to other disciplines like the natural sciences and engineering, but hopes that it might help fill what he perceives as an unfortunate gap in rewarding the efforts of humanities students.

More information about the Iwanter Prize and past winners can be found on the Center for the Humanities website: humanities.wisc.edu/research/iwanter-prize