The prestigious Moet and Chandon Fellowship means glamour, high profile and controversy for those who are the fortunate winners. Valued at some $50,000, it is the nation's most coveted art award for emerging artists. The award is made to entrants aged between 20 and 35 years.

Since its inception some five years ago, the Moet and Chandon Australian Art Foundation has also generously offered corporate support for the arts through a $50,000 acquisition grant. Each year the state gallery that opens with the show receives the grant. Its purpose is to fund the purchase of the work of younger artists.

With the funds, the National Gallery of Victoria has added to its collections with work by Jon Cattapan, Stephen Bush and Bill Henson. The Queensland Art Gallery has acquired work by Joy Younger, Judy Watson, Gordon Bennett and Eugene Carchesio. The Art Gallery of New South Wales has made purchases of John Nixon and Brian Blanchflower and the Art Gallery of Western Australia has acquired paintings by Hicky Allan, Ian Bettinson, Chris Fitzallen, Margaret Morgan and Petra Turner.

In addition, the Foundation organises a touring exhibition of the work of the 20 or so finalists for the Fellowship awards. This show is seen in all the major state galleries at varying periods during the year and it has been estimated that in excess of 200,000 see the show annually.

For the finalists, this public exposure has had varying effects. For a few it has meant more sales, but for the majority the greatest benefit is the confidence that comes from recognition and knowledge that their work is being seen by a wide section of the gallery viewing public.

But what has the award meant to the first five Fellowship winners Susan Norrie, Joe Furlonger, Elisabeth Kruger, Hollie and this year Gordon Bennett? Born in the fifties, these artists grew up reaping the benefits of enlightened changes in attitudes to the arts.

In the past artists were less fortunate. Recognition usually came later in life; and then after considerable struggle and hardship. During formative years such artists had to contend with an environment less sympathetic to their plight. True, there were occasional grants from public funding bodies, but no overseas residencies. Only a handful of institutions took art education seriously. And there were few commercial galleries or magazines. State galleries were less inclined to collect young contemporary artists and touring international art exhibitions were rare.

Most Moet winners agreed that the period overseas on the Fellowship was of enormous value to their careers and worked somewhat like a sabbatical. Time away to explore areas of personal interest in circumstances that guaranteed economic security. All but Hollie had been to Europe before. These trips were for short periods, however, and in circumstances where work undertaken was not largescale, but rather small and sketchy.

The free accommodation and studio facilities at Epernay provided by the Moet and Chandon estate, allowed more substantial work to be undertaken. Epernay is in the Champagne district of France, just south of Reims. All artists also used the studio as a home base, travelling widely at varying intervals to explore their particular interests.

Most spent the time self-absorbed, not seeking out other artists. Instead, the priority was to experience for themselves the landscape and the cultural artefacts and the art collections of Europe. Sometimes seeking out unconsciously or otherwise things
that inspired the great artists of the past - artists from whom they had learned only at second hand - through textbooks and magazines.

In particular, many felt they were better able to understand why various European artists had painted the way they did. Elisabeth Kruger commented that she was incredibly moved by actually seeing the facades of Monet’s cathedrals and experiencing how the colours and shadows worked at varying times of the day.

Several stated emphatically that ‘Australian artists had nothing to feel ashamed of’, that Australian artistic standards were as good as if not better than many whose work they saw. The Australian contemporary tradition by comparison with the European was seen as more visionary and experimental than the work shown by many artists exhibiting in the top commercial galleries in Paris. Several of the Fellowship winners had great praise for the high exhibiting standards of Australian commercial galleries in general, which they did not always find abroad. Interestingly, some thought their work had little relevance to European markets and felt it belonged in Australia.

Certainly since the award, the career of the first recipient, Susan Norrie, has continued to advance. Norrie, who had already exhibited at the Guggenheim in New York prior to receiving the Fellowship, had a successful solo show in New York last year, with other work exhibited both in Australia and overseas during this period. From her residency in France came the *Objet d’art* and the *Peripherique* series, extending her concern with the subject of art as a commodity.

Joe Furlonger felt the village lifestyle he experienced in Epernay highlighted the similarities between life in Australia and that in France. He felt the rural culture, unlike that of Paris, was more real and of considerable benefit in helping him come to terms with French history, subject matter and therefore French painting.

He recalled several incidents when he had a vivid sense of discovering the inspirational source of subject matter that had puzzled him in French painting. Describing a pushbike race in an obscure village he marvelled: ‘The vision of a town closed off for a secondrate pushbike race with the colour of the race, the riders and bunting gave me an immediate understanding of the imagery of Leger for the same subject’. There was also his encounter with the grand tapestries at Angers. There he sourced an inspiration for Matisse’s figures, in the large flattened figures of the woven design. It gave him great pleasure to think that these probably originated in folk tradition, a subject very close to his heart.

Representation has been a predominant concern of Furlonger’s work. And his experience in the British Museum of the great sculptures of Greece, with their idealised proportions, features and expressions, was a profound experience for him. Again of importance to the subsequent development of his figurative work was the impact of the Pieta images and paintings of Bellini and Tintoretto in Venice. He came across these almost by chance in the local academia and churches there. He said: ‘I like the immediacy and contemporariness of the recorded images of those times. For example, in the history paintings of the 1600s, the same shaped bread illustrated in these, you can see in the markets today.’

Elisabeth Kruger combined her Fellowship with 3 months as artist-in-residence in the Australia Council’s Visual Arts/Craft Board studio in Besozzo near Lake Maggiore. As an artist who began her career making quilts, a continuing preoccupation with Kruger has been decorative design and sensuality. In Europe it was the highly sumptuous expression of court culture of the Renaissance and later that were of great interest to her. The paintings of Titian, Corot and Courbet were both memorable and moving. Kruger commented that she painted beautiful surfaces and images inspired by such masters as a way of bringing these marvellous visual experiences into an Australian context.
Above: Joe Furlonger

Joe Furlonger: Deposition 1990, oil on canvas (courtesy Ray Hughes Gallery).
Kruger also pursued a private passion - her interest in gardens. For her, the garden is a symbol of renewal. Reflecting on this, Kruger said: 'I am interested in how we live and how we’ve changed... In Europe, you can’t be sure that a hill that’s there is in fact a real hill... There’s no way you can tell the original shape of the landscape... It’s all been reshaped, renewed.' For Kruger, the landscape in Europe was like a garden.

It was also a place where pattern is played out in decorative plantings. A high point of her stay was a visit to the chateau of Villandry near Tours in the Loire Valley where the extensive gardens, tended by 6 gardeners, are planted in vegetables, not flowers. Reminiscent of Renaissance gardens, she described them as quilt-like, patterned by discreet areas of cabbages, lettuce, peppers, carrots, marrow, beets or spinach.

Roses were featured on corners, topiary was used to decorate and hedges to demarcate the varying areas and levels of the garden.

The large island on Lake Maggiore was another garden where Kruger particularly enjoyed the unusual. Here she was enchanted by the sight of white peacocks roaming freely in a garden in which a stunning feature was a 30 foot wall espaliered with a combination of flowering roses and fruiting lemons.

For Queensland artist Hollie, the Moet Fellowship gave her the opportunity to visit the studio of sculptor Barbara Hepworth in St. Ives, Cornwall. A long time admirer of Hepworth, Hollie found this rekindled her love of sculptural form and since that time her work has begun to explore a more three-dimensional format.

Hollie also spent considerable time exploring pagan spiritual sites in Greece, Italy, Britain in France and Britain. She enjoyed the physicality expressed in the weathered stone surfaces of monuments to these ancient meeting places. Hollie’s exhibition from this time, ‘Unsettled Times’, reflects her disquiet and desire to move away from subjects of the past. Deeply affected by the ‘horrendous’ pollution of Europe, this work is confrontational and emotionally charged. She says: ‘The Europeans thought my work too aggressive, too crude and confrontational.’ However, she was largely unconcerned by this criticism. Made from plywood cutouts and roughly carved, they are stuck together as single figure paintings and stridently coloured.

For 1991 Fellowship winner Gordon Bennett, the trip away follows hard on the heels of the few months he spent in Europe last year, looking at the Van Gogh Centenary exhibition in Holland. Says Bennett: ‘This trip comes after six years of intensive work, it will be good to have a break and look at things afresh.’ On his return trip to Europe, Bennett plans to see the work of Piet Mondrian and Edvard Munch. Like fellow surfer Joe Furlonger, he also intends dedicating time to surfing the beaches of the west coasts of Portugal and France.

Undoubtedly, one of the great benefits of travel is the opportunity to detach from the obsessive rituals of everyday life and gain through the stimulation of new environments and new experiences. For all the Moet and Chandon winners this has inevitably been the gain. However, Australian culture is no longer rooted solely in Europe but is one increasingly concerned with its own Aboriginal people and the cultures of the Pacific rim. And while Moet and Chandon have taken a vital corporate initiative in promoting the visual arts of Europe to Australians, the direction they have taken is only a first step in widening the vision of our artists. The next is perhaps for a local corporation and must surely be to promote a more global vision, beginning with those cultures in our own region... perhaps a year visiting key Aboriginal centres in Australia or an extended stay in say Japan, the Americas, Hong Kong, Indonesia, New Zealand, Malaysia or Vietnam.
Above: Gordon Bennett
Below: Gordon Bennett Self portrait (But I always wanted to be one of the good guys)