



Visual Arts Efforts In Peace And Conflict Resolution: A Review Of Selected Exhibits

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ABSTRACT

The concept of peace is a universal quest in the hearts of many people. Individuals and corporate organizations and the world as a whole, tend to strive for peaceful co-existence among each other, in the face of mounting crises in the society, hence, the place of visual arts in social commentary cannot be overemphasized. Artists have created works which serve as statements on certain crises situations, wars and ravaging famine, as a result of conflicts (ethnic and religious), and outrage to certain social, economic or political manipulations. The potency of visual arts in propagating peace issues in the society cannot be overemphasised. In this article, which is an ongoing Ph.D. research, an attempt is made at reviewing some exhibits that deal with peace and conflict resolution, commentaries by artists to advance the art of painting and sculpture in the interdisciplinary approach to peacebuilding. The paper concludes by drawing inferences from the exhibits reviewed and calling on the relevant people and agencies to encourage more exhibits in public spaces for better understanding.

Key words: Visual arts, peace, conflict resolution, exhibits

INTRODUCTION

The concept of peace, is a universal quest in the hearts of many people. Individuals, corporate organizations and the world as a whole, tend to strive for peaceful co-existence among each other, in the face of mounting crises in the society, hence, the place of art in social commentary cannot be overemphasised. Artists have created works which serve as statements on certain crises situations, wars and ravaging famine, as a result of conflicts (ethnic and religious), and outrage to certain social, economic or political manipulations.

An allegorical story of peace in Picture of Peace (n.d) on the viability of using art to communicate peace in a society is hereby advanced: An artist was commissioned by a wealthy man to paint something that would depict peace. After a great deal of thought by the artist, he painted a beautiful country scene with all the trappings of peace. The wealthy man was disappointed with the painting, and asked the artist to try again. After several attempts of painting other genres relating to peace, and having several disapproval from his patron, the artist finally got an inspiration to create a new painting. In the painting, he put in a lot of thoughts and related icons to peace. The picture showed a stormy sea pounding against a cliff. The artist had captured the fury of the wind, as it whipped off black rain clouds, which were laced with streaks of lightening. The sea was roaring in turmoil, waves churning, the dark sky filled with the power of the furious thunderstorm. The focal interest was that, in the middle of the picture, under a cliff, the artist had painted a small bird, safe and dry in her nest, snuggled safely in the rocks. The bird was at peace, amidst the storm that raged about her. The story gives a vivid picture of peace in all its facets, in the negative and positive aspects. The path to peace can be laced with turbulence and storms. However, in between the turmoil, peace can

reign through the instrumentality of a few, and that is where art and the artists through their exhibits come to play their role. They do this by drawing attention to peace issues and conflict resolution efforts in the society.

Through their works, Artists, create a true reflection of the society, through graphics, realistic or sometimes abstract drawings, sculptures and paintings, expressing their feelings on certain matters, and relate same through their various exhibits. Picasso's *Guernica* and Goya's painting of the devastation of war, as typified in his work *3rd May 1808*, are good examples of artists' reaction to conflict situations and how such can be addressed through artistic media, to create a voice on the need for peace, in order to avoid the horrid, lurid and somber look, of conflicts and wars. An example is *Guernica* (Fig.1)



Fig. 1: *Guernica*, Pablo Picasso, Oil on Canvas, 1937, 138" x 308".

Source: <http://legomenon.com/guernica-meaning-analysis-of-painting-by-pablo-picasso.html>

Shabi (2013:1) gives a summary of *Guernica* being linked to Picasso's personal reaction to terror, and as an artist, his reaction was swift in the depiction of the painting. Today, *Guernica* adorns the wall of the United Nations office as a potent statement on the devastation of war, and the need to sue for peace and reconciliation through dialogue. In the same vein, Goya's earlier painting of *3rd May 1808* also portrayed the devastations of war and crises. Goya's painting was believed to have influenced Picasso's *Guernica*. Francisco Goya's *3rd May 1808* depicts the battle at Medina del Rio Seco in Spain. (See Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: *The Third of May, 1808 in Madrid*, Francisco Goya, oil on canvas, 1808, 1814-15, 8' 9" x 13' 4" (Museo del Prado, Madrid). Source: <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/becoming-modern/romanticism/romanticism-in-spain/a/goya-third-of-may-1808>

This painting is allegorical and symbolic of peace in the face of war. The white shirt of the figure with upraised “V” shaped arms is also symbolic of peace which was the artist’s unique style of driving home the message of peace. The price of peace is however costly, even in death, the figure in the painting still maintained the same pose, drenched in blood.

According to Zappella (2015:1)

Along with Picasso’s *Guernica*, Goya’s *Third of May* remains one of the most chilling images ever created of the atrocities of war, and it is difficult to imagine how much more powerful it must have been in the pre-photographic era, before people were bombarded with images of warfare in the media. A powerful anti-war statement, Goya is not only criticizing the nations that wage war on one another, but is also admonishing us, the viewers, for being complicit in acts of violence, which occur not between abstract entities like “countries,” but between human beings standing a few feet away from one another.

Shbeta, Ghaleb, Milikovski, and Indyke (2015:1) state that, “Art and dialogue are powerful mediums that can transform hearts and minds, even those of supposed enemies.” The potency of art-based peace building and conflict resolution in transforming the thought pattern of individuals, is propagated in this statement. The sometimes inevitable clashes in human society, have made various authors such as Shbeta et al (2015:1) and Schilling (2012:14) have lend their voices to the peace process in different disciplines. Schilling (2012:14) for instance states that, “The history of humankind has been significantly shaped by both love and conflicts that regulate human experiences in a cycle of compassion and bitterness”. Saliu (1994: 8) states that, “An art work has little value, if it is not relevant to the society in which it is produced”. Art has to be relevant in the society, and so also the artists who produced the works and exhibit same for the public to appreciate and interact with, either as an object of worship, as seen in some societies, or provoking emotional responses.

Sculpture as a visual art form, has been used as symbol of peace and conflict resolution, a case in point is the revered *Non-violence* sculpture by artist Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd (Fig.3).



Fig. 3: Non-Violence, Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd , Bronze.

Source: <http://cdn.earthporm.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/worlds-most-creative-statues-39.jpg>

The work is a bronze sculpture of an oversized Colt Python .357 Magnum revolver with a knotted barrel and the muzzle pointing upwards. Carl created this sculpture after singer, songwriter and peace activist John Lennon was murdered. The sculpture today is found in 17 locations around the world. Ten of the sculptures are at various locations in Sweden, the others are found in United Nations Headquarters, New York, USA, European Commission, Kirchberg, Luxembourg, Beijing, China, and Federal Chancellery, Berlin, Germany. Other locations are; Mémorial de Caen, Caen, France, Olympic Museum, Lausanne, Switzerland

and Victoria and Alfred Waterfront, Cape Town, South Africa. Art exhibits on conflict resolution dot various continents of the world, Africa, and Nigeria which is the focus of this research.

In Nigeria for example, the efforts of artists like Ukut's painting, *Peace*, (see fig. 4)

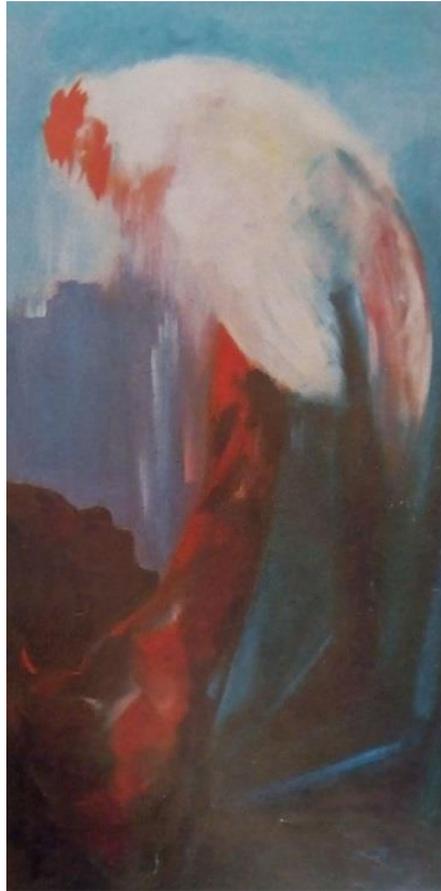


Fig. 4: *Peace*, Ukut, E.A Oil on Canvas, 99 x 50 cm.

Source: Ukut E., *Peace*. *Nucleus. Maiden catalogue of Works in Nigeria's National Gallery of Modern Art*. Federal Department of Culture, Lagos.

David- West's works, *No More Aggression* (see fig.5), *Unanimous Wish for Peace* and Kolade Oshinowo's *Conflict Resolution*, are visual arts exhibits noteworthy of mention in peace building and conflict resolution. Other contemporary artists like Mu'azu Sani Mohammed, Kevin Damden Samuel, and Sor Sen, just to mention but a few, are people who have made concerted efforts in the peace and conflict resolution area using visual arts.



Fig. 5: No More Aggression, David-West,H., Creative Poster, 100 x 77 cm.

Source: David-West, H. No More Aggression. *Nucleus. Maiden catalogue of Works in Nigeria's National Gallery of Modern Art. Federal Department of Culture, Lagos.*

ART EXHIBITS ON PEACE AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Where there is no Peace

Where there is no Peace (see plate I) is a sculptural piece by Kevin Samuel Damden to draw attention to the issue of peace and conflict resolution. The work is rendered in a representational manner using terra-cotta as the medium of expression. The piece is fired with some parts charred to accentuate the message during the firing process (charring is symbolic of burnings during wars and violence). The work depicts two figures, a mother and child that appear famished and forlorn. According to Onoja, Adeyemo and Lamidi (2016) in an article,

The mother is seated restlessly on a stool-like substance; with her overlapping scaly-like arms compacted together. The head is portrayed looking upward, with a distressed facial expression; her unkempt hair-do looks dreaded. The flabby breasts are hanging loosely on her chest, with pointed nipples. There appears to be a loose and worn-out wrapper around the waist, the two legs are spread partly to sustain its balance on the pedestal. Though, her child, who appears like a boy, contributes to the balance of the work. The skinny child seems sobbing, as if he is hungry, thereby looks as if he is seeking his mother's attention, with his hands round the mother's back and legs. Philosophically, the writer has no dissenting opinion regarding the title, as the piece depicts a pitiful expression that seemingly suggests impoverishment, which is a pointer to absence of peace.

The analysis of the work is a pointer to conflict situations in many parts of Nigeria, and the visual representation of a grotesque sculptural representation helps to steer the emotions of viewer to maintaining peaceful co-existence and shunning of violence and other forms of conflicts, conflicts leads to Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps and other social throes in the nation.



Plate I: Where there is no Peace, Kevin Samuel Damden, 2008, Terra cotta, 49cm. Collection of the artist

No Peace II

The eclectic nature and daring spirit of Sani Mu'azu Mohammed has made him create a large body of works on several issues in the visual arts space in Nigeria. *No Peace II* is a semi-abstract expressionistic liquidized painting produced in 1999. The work is dripped enamel on canvas presently in the collection of National Gallery of Art, Abuja- Nigeria.

The background of the painting is dominated with red and splashes of other colours like orange, blue, black and white dots spread in a pointillism style. The painting is allegorically symbolic. The dominant red colour captures vividly the intensity of hostilities and lack of peace within the regions the artist is making statement about. Red as a colour can either steer the emotion of danger and flight, which this work seeks to capture, or, warmth and love as in use in the love heart. Blue and white symbolize the small relative measures of peace and ceasefire agreements at the mercies of warlords who dishonour them at any given opportunity. The use of black symbolises the death tolls and other deadly diseases caused by the prolong hostilities and deprivation of essential health facilities/ services to vulnerable people- mostly women, children and elderly people in such conflict torn countries.



Plate II: No Peace II, Mu'azu Sani Mohammed, , Enamel on Canvas, 77cm× 109cm, 1999, Collection of the National Gallery of Art- Abuja

In discussing the painting, Mohammed (2003:91), affirms that, “It shows the state of children in an environment in which warfare consumes innocent citizens. Unless the problem is genuinely addressed, then there will be no real peace in the region and many more children will suffer the same fate”. This work is a socio-political commentary that recalls the ordeals of innocent children and women caught in war zones ranging from old events in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia and most recently, activities of the *Boko Haram* sect in Nigeria and neighbouring countries like Chad, Niger and Cameroon.

Yahaya (2010), who researched on the commentaries of Mu'azu Mohammed, succinctly describes the work:

As evidently portrayed in the work, the dominant red splashes of colour, succinctly captured the hostilities and restlessness of displaced children within these troubled regions. Children are separated forcefully from their parents due to disruptions caused by fighting and killing of hapless civilians within these societies. Incidentally, this is the scenario created in several IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) camps scattered across safe heavens catering for the displaced persons. The red also symbolize the huge psychological trauma suffered by these victims, thus the need for assistance from agencies concerned. ‘No Peace II’ highlighted similar scenario to a work titled “Guernica” painted by Picasso in 1913. It depicted the horror of Nazi's atrocities on innocent Spanish civilians’ massacre by Hitler's war planes in the Spanish city of Guernica.

This painting is currently in the collection of the National Gallery of Arts in Nigeria, is a potent reminder of the need to pursue peace and resolve conflicts amicably.

The Future is now This painting is an award winning painting (second position in 2012 National Art competition in Nigeria) by Sor Sen based in Abuja - Nigeria. The work is a multiple figure composition that depicts people from the various ethnic groups of Nigeria. The dexterity and unity in the composition draws attention to the focal action of the painting, which is unity, a synonym for peace. The central three figures symbolize the *Hausa*, *Igbo* and *Yoruba* people respectively. The figure to the extreme right with the right hand clutching the fabric being sown and the left hand in a raised position, represent the Niger delta region of Nigeria or south- south ethnic group, while the figure at the extreme left of the picture plane

represent Tiv ethnic group of the middle belt region of Nigeria. All the figures are seen engaged in sowing a fabric, painted in shades and tints of green, white and green, the national colours of Nigeria and the flag of the country. The background is painted with strokes of white, blues and yellows, symbolic of peace, love and renewed hopes. In the words of the artist, “The painting titled 'the future is now' is an expression of my desire to have a country Nigeria, where the elements that make up the state come together and work in unison for the betterment of all”. He continues by saying that, “This is portrayed by the unity displayed by various ethnic groups in mending the national flag.



Plate III: The Future is Now, Sor Sen, Oil on canvas, 90 x122cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Art.2012.

This painting is a wakeup call to unity and peace in a nation politically divided along ethnic and religious line”. The visual statement is potent, and hence, winning a vantage position in the visual art competition. This competition is a forum for discussion and involving various stakeholders in national issues.

At Peace with Nature

At Peace with Nature is another painting by Sor Sen. This post- impressionistic work shows a feminine figure with closed eye, curved outstretched hand and a dove perched on the hand. The head is surrounded with various hues of roses in a surrealist rendition. The background is intricately painted with woven strokes in interlocking shades of white, greys and yellows.



Plate IV: *At Peace with Nature*, Sor Sen, Oil on canvas, 80 x100cm. 2016.

The painting depicts peace issue using symbolism of the dove, roses and a woman. The dove as a symbol of peace has appeared in the paintings of Pablo Picasso and other artists, who use the dove as a universal symbol of peace and conflict resolution. Sor Sen in discussing the painting in an interview with him says that, “The painting titled, 'At peace with nature' is my view of womanhood. In the painting, I portrayed the woman as a symbol of love, this is symbolized by an impression of rose flowers forming an enclave around the head of the figure” . He goes on to affirm that, “womanhood is seen as a symbol for peace. This is portrayed in the composition as a dove takes a perch on the hand of the woman”. Sor Sen concludes by stating that, “If we all truly crave for love and peace, then a woman is the answer” (Sen, S.:2016. Oral Interview). This statement is quite philosophical and debatable, as the woman can be perceived in some quarters as source of some conflicts; however, the artist is dwelling on the easy going nature of the woman and persuasive ability to stand for peace and conflict resolution.

RETHINKING THE FUTURE OF PEACE AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

The visual art is a great and indispensable tool in peace and conflict resolution parlance. The works displayed in exhibitions, public spaces through murals and installations arts, park sculptures and other forms of visual arts expressions have helped and are helping in peace building in Nigeria. Individuals, cooperate bodies and Federal government agencies can concertedly encourage and advance the visual arts for better understanding.

Interactions with exhibits and the artists can also aid in the understanding of visual symbols, icons and insignias of peace and conflict resolution.

CONCLUSION

The works discussed in this article bear imprints of peace and conflict resolution. Paintings and sculptures have been used from pre photographic era to document wars and the need for peace building. The subtle and sometimes subliminal messages of artists are potent, and bringing such messages to the Nigerian populace and the world will enhance peaceful co-existence one hopes, to a society devastated by conflicts and wars. It is important that we seek peace and pursue same.

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