

What does 'peace' mean to me?

Educational resources supporting an exhibition of art by children and youth
organized by the Commonwealth Association of Museums

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Introducing the unit of instruction: A word to teachers

The Commonwealth Association of Museums (CAM) is a professional association and international non-profit NGO working towards the betterment of museums and their societies, in the Commonwealth family of nations and globally. Among their programs and activities is a goal to involve children and young people, not only as an audience for museums but also as participants through workshops and activities. This unit of instruction is intended to accompany an exhibition that focuses attention on peace. The theme is unquestionably important and one that means different things to youth whose life experiences and circumstances differ from one community to another and from one country to another.

Young people often combine image and text to more fully present an idea. The drawings eloquently convey thoughts and feelings, speaking to us in ways we can all understand; text adds a further layer of information. Text may be found within pictures in such forms as titles, speech balloons, or *found* text in the form of newspaper headlines and articles in a collage. Many of the works also include a handwritten statement mounted on the back, information that may not be available to audiences if the work is mounted on a wall. From a careful study and comparison of works we can come to appreciate the individual perspectives and cultural values present in each contribution to the exhibition. This invites each of us to examine our own experiences and enables us to understand ourselves more fully. This unit of instruction also invites viewers to engage with a set of ideas through art making. Concluding the unit are five art-making activities drawn from some of the approaches taken by the children and youths in their artistic answers to the question – What does peace mean to me? Those lessons follow what might be described as the major themes of the exhibition: defining peace, working towards peace, and celebrating peace. Teachers will be able to adjust the recommended art activities to the art experience levels, interests, and experiences of their students.

Exploring Themes in the Art

Defining Peace

War and violence as the antithesis of peace

A number of young people represented a specific theatre of war. One student, for example, has made reference to the so-called *war on terror*, choosing a specific event – the 9/11 attack that destroyed the World Trade Center towers in New York City (figure 1). Another student has used collage – newspaper clippings and a photograph of Osama Bin Laden, to address the war in Afghanistan that has, and continues to leave many people dead and wounded (figure 2). These young people are calling for a cessation of violence.

Figure 1. Artwork by Jonathan Campbell (age 13), Northern Ireland

Figure 2. Artwork by Christopher Sharkey (age 13), Northern Ireland

Local conflict and abuse

A similar perspective can be found in drawings of local events. One child illustrated the bullying of younger children by youths in a unique diagonal presentation of a street scene (figure 3) in which children who refuse to smoke cigarettes are pushed down and kicked. The message for all to read is in red letters “Ban violence from children.”

Figure 3. Artwork by Cathal Kerlin (age 10), Northern Ireland)

Working Towards Peace

Choosing the path of peace

Again, in the context of major conflict zones in the world, some young artists confront viewers with a decision. Few present this idea more effectively than the sign-post image entitled “Which Way?” (figure 4). The road to the left leads to grim newspaper headlines that *shout* such words as: fear, dead, bombing, and murder. The road to the right leads to: hope, love, and safety. This presentation with its bold red directional marker emphasizes individual and collective responsibility to make wise decisions. A similar compositional strategy is employed in figure 5 with the caption “Peace Not War.” The drawing is divided in half with the left side occupied by what appears to be an armed militia in green sweaters and ties. Behind them is a gray and lifeless background. Occupying the right is a group of youths, mostly girls, advancing toward the soldiers and waving placards bearing peace slogans. Their background is lush and green, filled with the promise of a brighter future. The alarmed men are put to flight, dropping their weapons as they escape the cheerful children. The message is that peace-loving citizens of all ages can make a difference when they come together in a peace march. Another child represents a call to peace (figure 6) through a ‘hippy’ urging viewers to choose peace over war. Posing between two signs planted in the grass, she flashes a peace sign with fingers making a ‘V’ shape while a banner calling for peace holds a prominent space in the upper area of the composition.

Figure 4. Artwork by James Kelly (age 13), Northern Ireland

Figure 5. Artwork by Sarah Mason (age 10), Northern Ireland

Figure 6. Artwork by Kirsty McCay (age 12), Northern Ireland

Surrendering arms is another path to peace, representing a decision to change course. In figure 7 a soldier in combat fatigues raises his hands to reveal that he no longer poses a threat. Falling from his hands are a sidearm and a grenade. At his feet are explosives and other weaponry. Perhaps the decision to give up violence will influence others to follow suit.

Metaphor is a powerful device for packaging an idea in a memorable way. It is more common for older youths to use this device and we see it employed in figure 8. The title of the work is “Climb a Mountain of Peace.” The young artist states in his writing that attaining peace is like climbing a mountain; it requires commitment, effort and courage to overcome obstacles, but reaching the peak makes it all worthwhile. Words within the rock and along the slopes fill out the student’s sense of the meaning of peace. “No slavery” evokes a chilling aspect of the suffering experienced by Africa and other parts of the world – a form of inhumanity that continues to this day in pockets of the world. Another metaphor found in the collection is that of a lighthouse. Peace shines out as a beacon to guide us in dark and dangerous waters.

For some youths, the path to peace is not through effort but through placing one’s trust in a higher power; faith in God who alone can bring peace, is a theme that emerges in several of the drawings. In figure 9 a youth dressed in a choir gown kneels and raises his hands to receive a blessing from the hand of God, a spiritual presence shines upon the supplicant. Another young artist represents peace by a church and families walking hand in hand to its open door (figure 10). In the paragraph accompanying the work the child asserts that peace begins in the heart – freedom from the guilt of sin. Individuals who know this kind of inner peace are responsible for living in harmony with others and for caring for God’s creation, the plants and the animals.

Figure 7. Artwork by Jeremiah Kaonga (age not available), Malawi

Figure 8. Artwork by Nimrod Hanai (age 15), Tanzania

Figure 9. Artwork by Samuel Odongo (age 16), Kenya

Figure 10. Artwork by Katrina Clark (age 10), Barbados

Celebrating Peace

Peace at home and in the community

At first glance there is nothing remarkable about the scene – a man and woman seated on a couch (figure 11). Not until we read the accompanying paragraph are we likely to see this as ‘celebrating peace.’ The eleven-year-old child’s statement says “Peace, to me, [means] mother and father staying and talking together in harmony.” Many children are fearful when parents quarrel or appear distant from one another; they are greatly relieved

when parents speak kindly and enjoy each other's company. A similar theme is taken up in figure 12 where harmonious relationships are apparent in this family of six, all enjoying conversation and reading. A bird, perhaps a dove, illuminates the domestic scene. The lessons of friendship extend to school in figure 13. "Peace is helping people and also being kind to all my friends and people in school and visitors to our school." A boy and girl extend their arms to clasp hands while a third person, perhaps a new student or perhaps the artist herself is framed on the left.

Figure 11. Artwork by Maille Kayombo (age 11), Tanzania

Figure 12. Artwork by Adebayo Alaba (age 16), Nigeria

Figure 13. Artwork by Niahm Downedy (age 9), Northern Ireland

Safety and abundance

Much like several drawings discussed earlier, figure 14 seems unremarkable in its subject. An elderly woman sits outside the courtyard of her home telling stories to her grandchildren. A closer inspection suggests a need for protection – a rather large dog is vigilant and a palisade surrounds the village. The attached statement makes reference to living without fear of being attacked. The paragraph also informs viewers that this is a night scene, the fire is for light and heat. People are more vulnerable to attack at night; being able to sit outside and share stories without fear is something to celebrate. Having enough to eat and being able to engage in normal domestic activities is often taken for granted. In figure 15 we see village life where all the necessities of life are present. Harvesting fruit from a tree, grinding grain, tending poultry, caring for an infant child, and repairing a modest and cozy home – all seems right with the world in this idyllic setting.

Figure 14. Artwork by Gogontle Moepeng (age 11), Botswana

Figure 15. Artwork by Ousaineu Lowe (age 11), Gambia

Thinking globally

From a quiet village to the entire planet, peace can be promoted. Against the backdrop of a world map seven people, perhaps children, clasp hands in a row that extends the full width of the drawing (figure 16). Each child has a heart on his or her chest and within that is the name of a continent – even Antarctica is included. The banner declares, "We need peace and solidarity in the world." Like many of the artworks in this collection, the student who drew this invested a good deal of time in planning and creating the work. That alone should suggest the importance of the ideas to the child and the commitment to persuading others to take up the cause. World peace may seem an unattainable goal and yet to take a defeatist attitude is to open the door to all things *not* peaceful. The artwork reminds us of our shared humanity and urges us to join those who would see peace prevail.

We've seen examples of peace in a very particular historical and cultural context, represented in ways that approach realism. We've also seen artwork that employs metaphor as a vehicle for conveying a perspective. Symbolism has been scattered throughout the examples shown here but symbolism is used extensively in this last example that is quite abstract. In figure 17 the profile of a dove in flight may not at first be discovered. The contour of the bird's head and outstretched wings divide the painting vertically. The left side represents situations where peace is absent. The black background is divided into discrete sections by contour lines made up of white words that are repeated: racism, terror, hate, shootings, and violence. Geometric shapes are clustered together and kept separate from other groups. In the body and tail of the dove, there is a marked contrast. Shapes of all kinds intermingle in a rich mosaic; energy and movement are apparent. Color is rich and glowing. We are given reason to hope the forward flight of the dove will bring freedom to those regions within society and around the world where restriction, fear, and suffering prevail.

Figure 16. Artwork by Asha Juma Ramadha Abdalla (age 14), Zanzibar

Figure 17. Artwork by Shannon Pennifold (age 14), Canada

Appreciating and Creating Art

Investigating Two Works of Art

Narrative empathy

Most of us look for something familiar in a work of art in order to make a connection. Usually it is subject matter that enables us to make a connection with the objects, the environment, or the figures. Narrative empathy means imaginatively placing oneself within the frame and feeling what it would be like to be there. This leads to considering what might have just happened or what might happen next, and developing or extending the single image into a brief story. One example that seems appropriate is figure 18, a watercolor painting from a young person in Kenya. In the painting an elderly man walks along a dirt road. A passenger vehicle filled with people is just ahead. Is it moving or stopped? Is the old man walking towards it or away from it? What might be the destination of the vehicle? Is there a village or a city nearby? If the man were to speak, what might he say? Imagine the outside temperature – is it hot or cold? Is there a breeze? Are there animal or bird sounds? What odors might be wafting in the breeze? Engage all of your senses. Then write a paragraph as someone *within* the picture or someone *about to enter*. We know this artwork is in response to the question, "What does peace mean to me?" But there are a number of possible explanations for what we find within the artwork. Offer a solution to the puzzle by building an interpretation into your paragraph.

Figure 18. Artwork by Awadh Jamal Awadh (age 14), Kenya

Interpreting symbols

Understanding a work of art that makes use of symbols calls for a different approach to interpretation. An ink drawing from a youth in Nigeria (figure 19) will call for some thought and discussion. Two giant hands reach from the ground – one supporting or touching a globe while the other is clenched as a fist. Rocks in this landscape are black or white and some bear a checkerboard pattern. The student is quoted as saying, “The picture is expressing that we are one world, one people, one peace.” Discuss your thoughts about how these symbols may support the ideas intended by the artist.

Figure 19. Artwork by T.O. Majah (age 14), Nigeria

Five Studio Art Projects

Metaphor

A number of young artists have found a way to represent peace by comparing it with a concrete and familiar object – climbing a mountain or the beacon of a lighthouse. Reflect on your own ideas of peace and consider a number of possible metaphors before finding a *fit*. What object seems able to serve as a metaphor or container to capture some of the important features that, for you, describe this complex concept? In a drawing or painting, complete the sentence, “Peace is like _____.”

Inside and outside

Some artworks in the collection make use of dramatic contrast – peace is compared with the *absence* of peace. In drawings (two-dimensional art) this commonly involves a division of the page to two halves. Interesting possibilities can be explored if this concept were applied to a three-dimensional artwork. Create a box or make use of a found container of some sort and apply imagery through painting or by attaching objects to the outside surface that represent a *threat* to peace. On the inside of the box, show a *solution* waiting to be released. Alternatively the solution could be on the outside with the threat securely locked inside.

Frames and designs

Many of the works in the exhibition include decorative motifs that come from a particular country, adding a cultural flavor to the art and making it more beautiful. Sometimes these designs have symbolic meaning but at other times they are simply appreciated as aesthetic. Some examples in the exhibition make use of a border while others have patterns and designs that decorate objects or spaces within. Any shape can be visually enhanced by applied decoration, taking it out of the ordinary and honoring it through embellishment. Adopt a familiar image associated with peace such as a dove, olive branch, or rainbow; alternatively choose a more unique and original image from nature that seems to convey ideas of gentleness and beauty. Create your own peace poster that uses design motifs.

Typography

Words can become art. Peace might be defined or promoted by selected words that are arranged on a page in a form that creates or expresses a larger idea. Here are several examples to start the thinking process:

1. The Commonwealth may be seen as a union of countries that fosters peace. A project could begin with a list that includes some or all of the names of countries and territories of the Commonwealth. Words written in block letters, perhaps on overhead transparencies, could be arranged on a page as spokes of a wheel radiating outwards, perhaps with the word 'peace' as the hub and 'commonwealth' as the rim. This is a formal composition that could then be colored in a way that has a symbolic 'logic' and an aesthetic that conveys positive feelings.
2. Students could brainstorm to create a list of words they associate with peace. A much more informal way of arranging type might involve overlapping 'peace' words then coloring the overlapped letters and other spaces to create a splendid 'mosaic' that is more spontaneous and intuitive. There are many ways to compose with words once we step away from the deeply engrained habit of arranging them in horizontal rows. Efficiency, being able to read the words, is not a major concern when viewers are prepared to spend time enjoying the beauty of the page; words may be discovered only after viewers have spent time studying the artwork, discoveries that come as a pleasant surprise.

Narrative

Many of the young artists have expressed their ideas of peace by using a particular incident or story that is personally meaningful to them. Many have added writing on the back to help audiences more fully understand and appreciate the event. Some have even written within the drawing. An established art form that combines these 'language systems' is the comic book. Here it is possible to block in narration to explain what is going on and to include dialogue through speech balloons. Think of a particular story in your life or your community that involves a difficulty that was or still needs to be resolved. Represent that story in a comic strip consisting of three or more panels. Or create a comic page that has rows of panels. Artists working on a plan for a movie or a television commercial might begin with a script and translate that into simple drawings referred to as a storyboard. These simple sketches allow the director and actors to follow a *visual* script. Storyboards are typically done with loose pencil drawings as an ideas page. Comic strips or even comic books, on the other hand, are more fully developed and refined. In whatever approach you take, use multiple drawings rather than a single frame to tell the story of what peace means to you.

Some Parting Thoughts

Wise beyond their years: Quotes from the writing of youngsters

While reading the written statements supplied by students to accompany their drawings, I was struck by the insights these young people have on the topic of peace. Here are just a few quotations for consideration:

Peace begins in the home. Sometimes it's hard to cooperate with your brothers and sisters (I should know, I've got three brothers and two sisters). Talking things over can make a big difference. Peace in school, peace in our community, peace in our country, peace in our world, is very important. Talking can solve most of our problems. (Roisin O'Neil)

Peace means that nobody is arguing, fighting, and that everyone is sharing, playing with each other, and no one is left out. (Kirsty McCay)

When a country is at peace it will develop its agricultural land, factories will be in process, and schools will produce intellectuals to plan the country's development. (Gilbert Quansah-Hayford)

The value of engaging young people in topics of substance: Replacing defeatism with empowerment

It is a well worn phrase that "Children are the future." Familiarity, however, doesn't make it any less true. When we ask young people to think about peace and to express their ideas about it we are guiding them to believe they can make a contribution to bettering their relationships with others, solving differences and resolving disputes within their wider community, and even influencing world events in a positive way. Education has failed in its purpose if it leads to passive acceptance of a status quo in need of change. And to identify problems without considering constructive actions is no better; this leads to defeatism and even cynicism. Education must lead students to hope – not a false sense of hope but one that is grounded in awareness of their potential and their responsibility to others. There are many shining examples of individuals who have worked tirelessly to the betterment of humankind. Children should aspire to be those kinds of people. Asking them to imagine peace – where it is needed and how it is achieved – is a positive and rewarding step.

It is only fitting therefore, to conclude this unit of study with an expression of gratitude to the Commonwealth Association of Museums for being visionary and proactive. Thanks too, to all of the teachers and students that have contributed to the exhibition. It fills *me* with hope.