

❖ PETER NIAS

The Peace Museum, Bradford, UK

“DO THE ARTS REALLY STRIVE FOR PEACE ?”**Summary**

Arts are used to promote pro-war cultures as well as pro-peace cultures. But which has had the greatest effect on the ordinary person? Also, what kind of art? – paintings, posters & poems, cartoons & graphic art & banners, films & photographs, monuments & sculptures, books & oral histories, drama & dance & music. This paper uses illustrated examples from each artistic method and compares their positive and negative messages as far as peace and war are concerned, including how they have been used and misused. It also questions how far images of violence can be used to promote a culture of peace. One conclusion is that more creative commissioning of artworks could help peace work.

Biography

Peter Nias has been at The Peace Museum, Bradford, UK since 1999. He has an MA in Peace Studies from Bradford University, UK and is also an Honorary Visiting Research Fellow there. He was originally an urban planner and then ran his own social and economic research consultancy business, including doing market research both on many museums in the UK and for the wider UK peace movement. He spent 1992-96 in post-apartheid Namibia creating and running that country's Mobile Museum and Education Service before being an economic researcher trainer, also in Namibia, from 1997-99.

Do the arts really strive for peace?

Introduction

Not all artists - in any meaning of the term – want to promote peace. Some – many – do so. Others, however, seem to want to glorify war whether or not they are paid to do it. There may be others who may even want to promote war.

The arts are used to promote pro-war cultures as well as pro-peace cultures. But which has had the greatest effect on the ordinary person? I will come back to that later.

- What kind of art are we talking about?
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 paintings, posters & poems,
 cartoons & graphic art & banners,
 films & photographs,
 monuments & sculptures,
 books & oral histories,
 drama & dance & music

All these can be created by both adults and by children.

I will use examples from each artistic method and compare their positive and negative messages as far as peace and war are concerned, including how they have been used and misused. I will also question how far images of violence can be used to promote a culture of peace.

Art competitions and productions are a good and often-used way of creating interest in peace work, especially amongst children and young people. For example, my museum has for the past four years held an annual ‘Conflict and Peace’ painting exhibition from teenagers in a local school. Although there is often quite a lot of violence portrayed in these, there are usually many perceptive illustrations of peace.

We also have the original and inspirational children's drawings of their 6,000 footsteps and messages for peace which were used at The Hague 1999 conference. These examples, and more like them, are good and need to be continued and creatively expanded as a peace education tool.

First, however, the different types of art and how they have been used:

Paintings & poems

Ask anyone outside the peace movement if they've heard of a peace painting, they will probably say no. Instead, ask if they've heard of an anti-war painting and Picasso's Guernica will doubtless head the list. Some may also say Goya's 3rd May 1808. There is also the lesser known Kathe Kollwitz (who was a sculptor as well as a painter) .

A few may mention the UK war artists like Paul Nash. I don't know about other countries, but the UK has a tradition of sending war artists, paid for by the government, to cover major conflicts. This may have started in older days when large battle scenes of land and sea were painted – some are still proudly displayed in the UK's Houses of Parliament.. Since the First World War the UK war artists have mainly shown the desolate landscapes of war rather than glorifying it.

Poems : Wilfred Owen's First World War probably stands alone in the UK as an anti-war poem. Nothing before or since has such feeling and resonance:

*“My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
 To children ardent for some desperate glory
 The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
 Pro patria mori”.*

In contrast, Tennyson's The Charge of the Light Brigade (in the Crimea war 1854) is probably paradoxically remembered as a war glorifying poem, whether or not he intended it as such. Of the current UK poets perhaps only Benjamin Zephaniah starts to approach the dignity of Owen.

If one considers the Bible to be a poem, then there are many positive messages. Swords into Ploughshares is one very commonly used. But that long poem has not always been used as a positive message for a culture of peace.

Cartoons & Graphic Art & Banners

Graphic art through posters and cartoons has been well used by both the war and peace movements. First there was the propaganda in World War One to promote joining the military (Your Country needs You). Much later after World War Two there was the massive use of anti-nuclear and pro-peace posters.

Most of peace art might well be in poster form. Indeed, the Bradford Peace Museum has almost half its collection in the form of posters and banners.

Cartoons have been used to portray a vital point, but very few become really memorable (perhaps Peter Kennard's Haywain Cruise missile). They are more 'of the moment' rather than long lasting.

Films & Photographs

There are likely, I would say, to be many more war films than 'peace' films. And the impact of the war films, of all types, is probably a pro-war or at least war and violence acceptance message to the general population. Whether war films are real or fiction, whether they portray the Romans and Greeks, or the middle ages, or colonization, or world wars, or Vietnam, and whether it is a war or supposedly anti-war message that they show, the net effect of them, combined with the so-called violent 'action' movies, is to equate war with excitement. In contrast, when did people in general get as 'hyped -up' as much after a peace movie? Possibly 'Gandhi'? I can't think of any others.

However, photographs seem to be used very differently, with a much greater and sustained anti-war message. The moment frozen in time demands greater reflection from the viewer than does an action movie. Such famous photos include 5 year old Kim Phuc burnt by napalm in Vietnam – very much anti war ; Princess Diana walking through a minefield ; the soldier being killed in the Spanish Civil War 1936.

Monuments & Sculptures

Monuments to the war dead may be a memorial but how they are designed too often presents at best a mixed message and at worst a form of recruiting image for the military. The underlying message is: we remember those who diedand we're even more determined to fight, and suffer, again if needs be.

One of the best monuments I have seen is a bridge over a river (Jackfield, Telford, UK over the River Severn), built as a very practical World War One memorial. It includes a plaque to the fallen.

One of the worst sculptures I have seen is one of a mythical figure of Violence being 'killed' from Bradford's Cartwright Hall Art Gallery. Made in the 1920's, it reflected the feeling that violence could remove violence. And it is still on public display.

But not all is negative. The 'Beloved' statue outside Bradford University library sends a very positive message.

Books & Oral histories

If one calls the written word art, then we've seen the recent boom in books about war helping to fill many bookstores, certainly in UK. In contrast, during the 1980's, there was a boom in peace books. So I guess it's a reflection of the times as much as anything.

It doesn't have to be books. Oral histories can keep alive the past – the Herero people in Namibia still have a warlike disposition. That same group also have gravestones of their leaders made in the shape of a rifle rather than a cross.

Drama & Dance & Music

Drama and dance have been used in anti-war themes. However, music is the very powerful medium which seems to have portrayed the most war-like feelings, whether it be patriotic anthems or marching music.

Conclusions

I would say that the images of peace, or even anti-war images, have struggled to keep up with the greater impact of the images of war. Some of this is due to historical inertia, when the wars of the past have been recorded and replayed for our 'entertainment'. However, some of the best anti-war images are still being neutralized. The copy of Picasso's Guernica on display in the UN Building in New York was covered up in 2003 because it was visible behind US Secretary of State Powell when he announced the Iraq war. I don't imagine that Pablo would have been too pleased.

As the peace movement, we are doing our collective best. One overall conclusion is that we need more creative commissioning of either positive or negative peace artworks to help inspire more peace work. However, to reach a wider and popular audience outside the peace movement is a very real challenge indeed.