



Eulogising The Concept Of Peace In The Paintings Of Jacob Onoja

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary art practice in Nigeria has witnessed great patronage and gaining acceptance in the country. Artists have worked concertedly in their studios before bringing to the public spaces exhibitions of their creations. One of such artists is Jacob Enemona Onoja, a painter cum art historian whose unique style of landscape painting draws attention to peace issues. In this part of the world, Nigeria, particularly the northern part of the country has witnessed several religious, ethnic and communal crises. In recent times, the political scenario has added to the upheavals in the country. One of which was the 2011 general elections in Nigeria. Many souls were lost and people rendered homeless. Artists, especially in Plateau State, took the initiative to produce works which could speak against the incessant crises in the State and the need to pursue peace. This paper draws attention to how the artworks of Jacob Onoja advance peace through the allegories of their creation. The purposive method was used to select works from a large collection of the artist in order to streamline the discussion to peace and conflict resolution.

Keywords: Eulogise, Peace, Landscape, Painting, Jacob Onoja

INTRODUCTION

The need for global peace cannot be over emphasised due to the impending communal, ethnic and religious crises which have bedevilled local communities and the globe. The first and longest serving Prime Minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru x-rays peace as, “not a relationship between nations. It is a condition of mind brought about by a serenity of soul... Lasting peace can come only on peaceful people.” Hinging on this, it is therefore evident that artists fall in this category of peaceful people. Artists over time have engaged in discussions which pertain to peace using their artistic prowess. In such paintings, artists use white doves, flowers, angels and other objects and allegorical subject matter which best describe the contextual meaning of peace at that period of occurrence. Interesting to note, there is a set of artists who have delved into using the portraits of Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and other icons as the symbol of peace in their artistic works. While others use flowers, peace flags and allegorical landscapes for the works to connote peace.

Many groups and organisations over time have created avenues for rallies, campaigns and art exhibitions for peace awareness. For instance, UNESCO has been at the forefront in such activities.

There are art galleries whose sole activities move around peace; however, war and communal clashes have not stopped. This is not to say that artworks for peace awareness have not impacted on the populace of the world. Its tremendous impact cannot be quantified. *Guernica*, a classical painting by Pablo Picasso is a potent painting on the issue of peace and adorns the wall of the United Nations office. The painting was veiled when the United States of America declared war on Iraq. It is pertinent to note that, the dialogues imbued in a painting can make people act rightly or take up stands against the statements in a painting. Other works like Goya's painting on the *3rd May 1808, The Knotted Gun* by Carl Fredrik Reuterswård and *Let Us Beat Swords into Ploughshares* by Evgeniy Vuchetich are few examples of works with strong allegories of peace.

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The Artist, Jacob Enemona Onoja

An indigene of Kogi State, Nigeria, born on 14th September 1975, in Abeokuta, Ogun State. He had his primary and secondary education between 1981 and 1993 at the Army Children School II, and Command Day Secondary School, both in Rukuba Military Cantonment (now Maxwell Khobe Cantonment), Jos, Plateau State. He had a short stint in painting apprenticeship with Benco Art Gallery, Kaduna which enabled him to start his private studio work at the Diadem Art Gallery, Bassa Market complex in Plateau State. The private practice enabled him to raise funds for his much-desired tertiary education to pursue his dream in the visual arts. He proceeded to Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria and graduated with a Bachelor degree in Fine Arts where he specialised in painting. Subsequently, he went back to his Alma Mata and bagged his Master of Arts (M.A) in Art History and PhD. Art History in 2008 and 2017 respectively. In his pursuance of excellence, he went to the New York Film Academy U.S.A, Harvard Campus programme, and obtained a Diploma in 3-D Animation in the year 2012. Currently, he is a lecturer at the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Faculty of Environmental Sciences, University of Jos. Plateau State.

A prolific painter especially the landscape genre and canny art historian, Onoja has received many commissions, awards and participated in several exhibitions, seminars and conferences. Few among such activities are to his credit: Manuscript Writing Workshop organized by the Jos - Carnegie Partnership Committee (JCPC), Unijos in collaboration with the West African College of Surgeons (WACS) 5th – 6th September, 2011. A 3-D Animation workshop at the New York Film Academy, Harvard University summer programme, Cambridge Massachusetts, United States of America. In 2012. Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA) Artists workshop/ Exhibition, Jos Museum, 24th August, 2013, and Unijos Pavilion Designer/ Exhibition stand, International Students Film Festival organized by the STEP- B World Bank Project. 2013. He is an active member, Society of Nigerian Artists (MSNA). Onoja's love for nature is vividly noticed in his landscape paintings and the application of brilliant colours in his works. His brush strokes are subtle and gently but the messages are loud as they expose the grandeur of God's creation. This has to do with his strong belief in God the creator of all things, which after God has finished the creations, He (God) looked at everything and said, "it was very good." It is also worthy to note that, the artist carefully chooses his themes from happenings around him, peace and spiritual expositions which he relates to in his artworks. His realistic paintings are vividly depicted in bright colours, vegetation and sometimes, with foggy atmosphere, while the cityscapes are mostly abstracted with bold strokes created using the palette knife in impasto rendition. His art historical writings and articles espouse peace issues and current trends in visual arts exhibitions and themes which provoke dialogues in the society. In a recent exhibition by Onoja, Deshi (2018) in an interview reports on Onoja, "Dr. Jacob Onoja an elite artist...chat about visual arts and its place in society." Deshi asks the question, how did you venture into arts? What fuelled the journey into that world? Of which Onoja responds "From early childhood, I have always loved art and creating various designs in my home and community. My parents

believed so much in my passion for art and encouraged me early to pursue a career in visual arts. Today, I hold a Ph.D. in my dream career and fuelled with the passion for greater creations of paintings, especially landscape paintings and art historical discussions and writings.” Similarly, other media interviews granted with private and international media houses espouses the place of Onoja’s works in promoting peace in a society fragmented along various fault lines of religion, ethnicity, politics and other issues in the society.

His Paintings in Relation to Peace

Plateau state of Nigeria is beautifully spotted with hills, mountains, grassland, streams and ponds. Its motto stands as “Home of Peace and Tourism,” the chilly atmosphere attracts both local and foreign visitors to the state. During the colonial times, tin mining activities took the centre stage which covers mostly the northern and central zones of the state. The long-experienced peace came to a standstill in September 2001 when a religious crisis broke out. Since then, spots of crises keep erupting at the slightest provocation. Authors like Best (2007), Higazi (2011) and Krause (2011) succinctly discussed the root causes of the crises, proffered solutions to deescalate the crises and place in context the various conflicts in Jos, Plateau State. The whole import is to call on all stakeholders to pursue peace and create room for conflict resolutions of which Onoja is lending his creative acumen to propagate peace through the statements in his landscape paintings

Onoja’s love for this a peaceful environment is captured in a painting titled, “Dew of Heaven on the Plateau” in Plate I. The artist utilised the dual misty mountain whose meeting point produces a flowing river with fresh water. His understanding of the area improves his vision of the Plateau scenes. The fresh grassland land is punctuated with low trees as though someone carefully arranged them to form a pattern on the landscape. This scenario gives a fresh and peaceful feeling to the onlooker. A similar feeling can be connected with the freshly green landscape painting of Hannibal Mane titled, “Nature Symphony” which is categorised under global peace paintings. The two paintings eulogise peace through nature depiction in its realistic form.

One of the characteristics of the Plateau landscape is the sudden appearance of rock formation in areas one least expected them to appear. In this painting, the foreground reveals six rocks which seem to be packed in a place with one standing erect as if it is situated above the others to either address the rocks which take the position of humans or cautiously take a view at the enemy’s camp while others lie in wait for alert. The peaceful scene in this painting is freshly watered by the dew of heaven with no sign of humans or animals. The subtleness of the brush and blending of the colours echo the serenity in this painting. The quietness penetrates into the bones anytime one thinks of the deserted lands within the Plateau as a result of the impending crises. In earlier days, such plains were spotted with humans taking a walk or having picnics in such peaceful landscapes.



Plate I: Dew of Heaven on the Platform, 60 x 90cm, Acrylic on canvas, 2018. Private Collection.

The rock formations on the Plateau are aesthetically breath-taking. Many communities built their houses on the bed of the rock which serves as fortress. The legend surrounding this is that of a war scenario. The legend says, before the colonial rule, wars were fought within communities. For this reason, communities used the rocky areas as shield from their enemy. One of the wars was that of Othman Danfodio whose jihad also came to the Plateau but could not penetrate because of the rocky nature of the areas.

The “Fortress” (Plate II) in this painting is a narrative of the earlier mention of the war scenario on the Plateau. The rock formations at the background and foreground respectively exemplify the idea of a fortress. The artist chose to project at the far background more rocky scenes to create visual projection of the Plateau. The calm blue sky blends with the foggy light blue on the rocks, while the leafy green trees equally reflect on the green grass at the foreground. On the Plateau, the cultural huts usually adorn the rocks with her brown colours. To eulogise the “fortress” in this painting, three human figures are seen standing in peaceful posture and at various points. Some of the miraculous scenes that can be spotted in the peaceful Plateau is how a tree grows on rocks. Where are the roots and how can the tree draw water from the rocks? Such questions can only be found in places where the environment is devoid of turbulence.



Plate II: Fortress, Acrylic on Canvas, 60x90cm, 2017, Onoja

The cactus as a plant seen in most Plateau communities has many functions. One of such is used as a fence in farms or residential houses. It also serves as a boundary between lands and hedges for livestock. The cactus is a common green plant with thorny surfaces which can grow to about 10 or more feet high. In the painting titled, “Deserted Fortress”, the cactus plant is seen at the background neatly arranged which formed a hedge. The two round huts spotted at the left hilly side of the painting seem quiet. There is no sign of life in this environment like the previous work. Recently, the herdsmen attacks on communities on the Plateau have left many villages deserted and areas abandoned for grazing frenzy.

The realistic nature of the painting in “Deserted Fortress” in Plate III brings a nostalgic feeling about the frail-peaceful Plateau. It prompts the question, can the Plateau still be regarded as the Home of Peace and Tourism? A situation where it has become difficult to travel to many areas in the state without being hunted has undermined the heralding of the said peace in the Plateau. Tourism is equally set at the verge of collapse, since it is fretful and deadly to climb the hills for sight-seeing. The beautiful Plateau and its longest fortress jingles have more deserted hills and valleys now than ever before. This painting brings to the observer’s knowledge that; the deserted fortresses can be reclaimed by sincerely living in peace with one another. It can best be done when the security challenges are addressed by the government, politicians, community leaders as well as the spiritual heads.



Plate III: Deserted Fortress, Jacob Onoja, 60 x 90cm, Acrylic on canvas.2018.

Onoja's paintings are not restricted to only landscapes but equally include city scenes. His brief stay in the United States of America has influenced his view about sky-scrapers. In the painting titled, "Kaleidoscopic City", the artist shows a changing world. In city where it is expected to depict cars and crowd flowing in the street, the artist chooses to show five visible persons walking with umbrellas. The sky-scrapers at the left hand side of the street look neatly and well-arranged while those at the right hand look rumbled and dirty. This scenario can be likened to Syria where some cities have suffered damages as a result of the war in that country.

Kaleidoscopic which is synonymous to rapidly changing the situation can be applied to suggest, in this painting, that our cities which are today adored as beautiful and sophisticated will one day be old fashioned and abandoned. This can occur due to war, natural disaster or modernisation. The painting shows a deserted street with mixed feeling of a peaceful environment. This, however, does not negate the fact that, the rain shower in the painting gives a calm scenario no matter the situation in the area. Also the gentle movement of people is an indication of a peaceful environment. Despite the unusual quietness and linear strokes in the painting which can suggest fast-lane of life of a city, the blue colour reflection on the buildings and streets brings calmness; hence the need for eulogising peace as the main focus of the painting.



Plate IV: Kaleidoscopic City II, Jacob Onoja, Oil on Canvas, 60 x 90cm, 2018.

In northern Nigeria, the horse is a symbol of royalty and strength. Artists, most especially those who at one time or another had lived in the area, are fond of using the symbolic form of the horse. Onoja as one of those artists had his three degrees from Zaria, hence his deep knowledge of the horse and the mud northern architecture. In the painting tagged, "Symbolism" the artist chooses to express himself

with watercolour on paper against the usual acrylic or oil colours on canvas showing his dexterity with various media. The fluid nature of the painting reveals the subtle nature of the composition. This is similar to Deborah Ronglien's water colour painting tagged, "World Peace" where she used the three doves flying as symbols of peace in this troubling war. Onoja equally employed three horses with a similar colouring technique as Ronglien's. This is not a coincident rather a match of artists' thoughts and imaginations about the same theme.

The three horses are depicted in a racing posture. Without their riders, the symbolic nature of the painting eulogises the racing game of horse normally experienced during the Ramadan celebrations. In such peaceful and merry making festivities, *Durbar*, the horse riding parade is observed with the Emir presiding over the ceremony. Horses are well fed and highly adorned with assorted clothes, beads, cowries and leather decorations which are of local or foreign origins. The colourful decoration of the horses and the riders add to the aesthetics sensation of the celebration.



Plate V: Symbolism, Jacob Onoja, 20 x 25 cm, watercolour on Compressed Paper, 2005.

Similarly, in Plate VI, This painting is very unique in the sense that it connotes both traditional and the conventional horse race which is a worldwide sport. In Nigeria however, *Durbar*, a traditional festival common in the northern part of the country is a festival which draws international recognition. A good look at the painting shows three horsemen in full gallop. The artist used palette knife for vigorous brush strokes to capture the essence of the festival. The fusion of colours, forms and space create a unique harmony in the composition which gives a feeling of exhilarating excitement and adrenaline rush seen in the festival.



Plate VII. The race, Oil on Canvas, 61 x 91cm, 2017.



Plate VII. Country side Allegory, Oil on Canvas, 61 x 91cm, 2019.

This painting shows an allegorical landscape of a country side in Jos, Plateau State – Nigeria. Colours like green, yellow, ochres, blue and purple are used in the composition. The use of bold strokes applied using the palette knife is a unique feature seen in most of Onoja's paintings. The grey areas around the mountain side were carefully outlined to give a sense of distance and aerial perspective. The use of varying strokes gives the painting a tactile appeal, as the viewer can spend time interacting with the painting because of the careful use of the principle of variety and balance in the use of colours and other elements and principle of art seen in the landscape painting.

A write up on the painting tag gives on an insight into the mind of the artist in the creation of the painting. "The pristine air of the country side is therapeutic. The undulating mountains, green areas and natural meadows, the heavenly feels of wildflowers blossoming with life and a myriad of fragrances filling the air draw one into the landscape with a love for more. Actually, I am thinking of a city, whose maker and builder is God. Rev.21: 18 – 27." The poetic rhyme of the artist and painting encapsulates the aesthetics dexterity of the artist while using his Christian beliefs to preach peace and calmness.

CONCLUSION

Artists across the globe choose to express peace in their works using many approaches. Some give a calm scenario to depict peace while others could reveal a chaotic scene to project the need for peace. Onoja's paintings capped the symbolic peace in the Plateau. The artist employed both his subtle painting styles and the brilliant colour application to eulogise peace and societal coexistence. To project more of this, he embarked on a realistic rendition of subjects to make his narration on peace and the need to maintain same relatable. His works, especially the landscapes, have little or no figures, this is deliberate as the artist feels that, people should enjoy the unsoiled and therapeutic power of nature and be the imaginary figures in them. That way, we will either be maintaining peace or generating conflicts by altering the course of nature. Onoja's works should be collected by relevant agencies and art connoisseurs for preaching peace and also for documentation of visual arts peace based issues in relevant agencies.

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