

FAITH AND THE ARTS

Interfaith artists join in 'Amen,' a prayer for the world

By Jerry Hames

The work of an unprecedented gathering of artists from the Arab and Christian worlds will be exhibited in the United States this fall, the initiative of an American priest who was a mission partner from the Episcopal Church posted in Egypt with his family for ten years, before the recent revolution in that country.

The exhibition, which opened in Cairo in June, draws from the talents of 30 Egyptian artists, both Christian and Muslim. When it reaches the United States in late August, it will be displayed in two cathedrals, first in Washington, D.C., and then in New York, and will be augmented by the works of 18 American, English and French artists with Jewish or Christian heritage.

"The arts can serve as one of the most effective mediums of building bridges of respect, understanding, sharing and friendship between the creeds and cultures of the East and West," said the Rev. Paul-Gordon Chandler, the Episcopal mission partner. He retains strong ties in Cairo and was present in mid-June when the grand mufti of Egypt and the Anglican president bishop of the Episcopal Province of Jerusalem and the Middle East opened the exhibition at the Cairo Opera House.

In the belief that the arts can be used to facilitate intercultural and interreligious dialogue, Chandler founded the nonprofit organization CARAVAN to serve as a catalyst for building bridges of understanding and respect between Christians and Muslims, primarily through the visual arts.

In 2009, he inaugurated an interfaith arts festival in Cairo that has grown into a movement that encourages the creeds and cultures of East and West to journey together through the arts. Chandler described the latest annual exhibition as "a large-scale contemporary arts initiative that is interfaith at its core."

With its theme "AMEN — A Prayer for the World," the show expresses a deep, fundamental acknowledgement of power and hope in the universe for all, he said. "While the peoples of the Middle East and West may express prayer differently, it is a commonality that unites us all, serving as a universal bridge."

To express this concept, Egyptian sculptor Reda Abdel Rahman created four different human forms at prayer, symbolizing human diversity, community and the forms that prayer can take. Contributing artists then painted or decorated one of the sculptures as they wished.

The sculptured forms, slightly larger than lifesize in 3D fiberglass, communicate a modern sense of Amun, the deity of ancient Thebe in the 21st century B.C. who is considered to be the first to develop a concept toward monotheism. In the exhibition, the historic figure of Amun is associated with the word "Amen," an affirmation commonly used to conclude Christian, Muslim and Jewish prayers or blessings.

The forms in the four sculptures at prayer are all in meditative poses. One, typically Muslim, sits on the floor with legs tucked underneath, body resting on heels. The second, in a common contemplative position for Jews and Christians, sits on a chair with head bowed.

The last two are in standing poses, one with head bowed and hands held in front, common to all three faith traditions, and the other with head back and arms out to the side with palms held upward in celebration, or openness.

For the U.S. exhibition, which opens in Washington National Cathedral on Aug. 30, the 30 Amun figures painted by Egyptian artists will be joined by the 18 figures created by Western artists. The exhibition remains in Washington until Oct. 6, then moves to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York from Oct. 12 to Nov. 16.

"It is increasingly evident that religion plays a significant role in shaping global emphases, and much work lies ahead toward finding ways that all faiths cannot only live peacefully together, but be respected and embraced: not just in Egypt but throughout the West as well," Chandler said. "It could not be timelier to be involved in this artistic, intercultural and interreligious initiative of peace building, toward promoting a sectarian-free world." ■



Egyptian Christian and Muslim art is on display at the Cairo Opera House in Egypt. When the exhibition reaches America in late August, it will stop in Washington, D.C., and New York and be supplemented by the works of 18 Christian and Jewish artists from the West. Above, clockwise from upper left, are works by Egyptian artists Dablia Refaat, Mohamed El Masry, Ahmed Abd el Karim and Mohamed Shaker.

What is CARAVAN?

It is an international, interfaith, nonprofit organization, working through and under the Episcopal Church to build bridges through the arts between the creeds and cultures of the East and West.

Paul-Gordon Chandler, currently based in Chicago, most recently served from 2003 to 2013 as the rector of the Church of St. John the Baptist/Maadi in Cairo, an international English-speaking Episcopal/Anglican church in the southern part of the city. It is an international congregation with members from more than 30 nationalities that welcomes people from other denominations and faith traditions, primarily from the diplomatic, academic, NGO (nongovernmental organization) and business communities.

In carrying out its mission, CARAVAN works closely with many diverse partners in the East and West, including artists, curators, grassroots nonprofit organizations/NGOs, galleries, museums, educational institutions, art fairs,

faith communities/religious institutions, interfaith organizations and art auction houses.

Funding for the programming and arts festival has come from numerous partnerships in addition to churches, including the British Council, an international organization that promotes cultural relations, and SODIC, an Egyptian real estate development firm that sponsored this year's exhibitions.

A charity auction will be held following the New York showing, and a share of the proceeds will be given to an Egyptian charity that is establishing a girls school.

In 2013, in Cairo, thousands of Egyptians and foreigners viewed CARAVAN's public exhibition of painted donkeys, symbols of peace and compassion to both Christians and Muslims, created by 45 local and international artists. The exhibition then moved to London and was viewed by more than 120,000 people at St. Paul's Cathedral. ■