



...bringing East and West together through Art for a New World

THE MALTESE PEACE DONKEY

An East-West Artistic Peace-building Initiative
of the Mediterranean Basin
at the
MDINA CONTEMPORARY ART BIENNALE

Mdina, Malta
Beginning 14 November 2015
and throughout 2016

The Maltese Peace Donkey Project

An East-West Artistic Initiative

An unparalleled gathering of premier Mediterranean artists using the symbol of the Maltese donkey to communicate the need of “peace and compassion” between the cultures and creeds of the East and West

Introductory Background

The Maltese Peace Donkey Project is a strategic public arts initiative that focuses on the critical importance of building harmony between the Middle East and West by creatively communicating a message about “peace and compassion” toward the “other”. It is believed that this unique public arts initiative will speak powerfully to today’s need of creating respect, developing understanding and encouraging friendship between the Middle East and West.

The Mediterranean region, unlike any other in the world, with its 21 countries, represents both historically and contemporarily an intercultural bridge between the East and West. Within this region, the country of Malta is a symbolic and historic icon of East-West interaction, both culturally and religiously. While today a member of the European Union, over its history the island has been ruled by a succession of Eastern and Western powers; Phoenicians, Romans, Moorish, Normans, Sicilians, Habsburg Spain, Knights of St. John, French and British.

The Maltese language illustrates this profoundly. Maltese is the only Semitic language in the European Union. The language descended from the now defunct Sicilian-Arabic dialect. Having a Semitic base, the language has a Siculo-Italian influence with French and English additions.

The East-West nature of Malta is nowhere more clearly represented than in the ancient city of Mdina. Mdina is a medieval walled town situated in the center of the island on one of the highest points. Mdina owes its present primary architecture to the Arab period, from 870 until the Normans conquered Malta in 1091. Today the city displays an unusual mix of Arab, Norman and Baroque architecture.

In the heart of the city stands the magnificent St. Paul’s Cathedral. This impressive cathedral is the host of the Mdina Contemporary Art Biennale scheduled between 14 November 2015 and 7 January 2016. Dozens of premier contemporary artists from around the Mediterranean will participate in this significant art initiative under the theme of “The Other”.

In the context of the Mdina Contemporary Art Biennale, CARAVAN is organizing a strategic public art project entitled The Maltese Peace Donkey Project, which will be a unique gathering of renowned Mediterranean artists (Middle Eastern and Western) coming together to artistically express the importance of intercultural dialogue between the East and West.

Strategically using the famous and rare Maltese donkey as an East-West bridging symbol, 21 life-sized fiberglass “Maltese” donkeys will be produced for the Mdina Contemporary Art Biennale. Each donkey will be painted/decorated by 21 noted and emerging Maltese and Mediterranean artists to represent the East-West nature of the Mediterranean: one for each of the 21 Mediterranean nations. They donkeys will be displayed at public venues throughout the ancient city of Mdina for the Biennale. Following the Biennale, a donkey will be sent to each

Mediterranean country to be used as a public symbol of the “peace and compassion” that is needed to build bridges between the East and West.

The Maltese Peace Donkey Project follows in the footsteps of both the widely successful 2013 CARAVAN public art donkey initiative (“In Peace and with Compassion”) in Cairo, Egypt and London, and also of an international approach to public art that has featured painted animals. This first happened in Zurich, Switzerland in 1998, when painted fiberglass cows appeared around the city. Chicago followed suit in 1999, and other cities around the world have since done something similar with painted fiberglass animals (elephants in London, bears in Paris, etc).

Background on CARAVAN

The Maltese Peace Donkey Project builds upon eight successful years of large-scale strategic East-West arts initiatives implemented by CARAVAN. CARAVAN, an international and inter-religious peace-building arts NGO (non-profit) that originated out of Cairo, Egypt in 2009, has the objective of building bridges through the Arts between the creeds and cultures the Middle East and West. CARAVAN’s experience has shown that the Arts can serve as one of the most effective mediums to enhance understanding, bring about respect, enable sharing, and deepen friendship between those of different cultures and faiths from the Middle East and West.

One of the flagship initiatives of CARAVAN is the globally recognized interfaith CARAVAN Exhibition of Visual Art (and Festival), a unique arts initiative that brings together many of the Middle East’s and West’s premier and emerging artists. These CARAVAN exhibitions have resulted in unprecedented gatherings of renowned Middle Eastern and Western artists coming together to use art as a bridge for intercultural and inter-religious dialogue.

The following is an overview of some of CARAVAN’s artistic initiatives over the last few years.

In **2013**, many thousands of Egyptians and Westerners in Cairo viewed CARAVAN’s public art exhibition of painted/decorated life-size fiberglass donkeys (the donkey being a symbol of “peace and compassion” in both Islam and Christianity) involving Egypt’s premier artists and noted Western artists. Then the exhibition moved to London to the world renowned St. Paul’s Cathedral and was viewed by over 120,000 people. Following the CARAVAN exhibition in London the artworks were auctioned at a charity auction led by Sotheby’s to raise funds for charities in Egypt serving the poor.



“In Peace and Compassion” Egyptian Donkeys at St. Paul’s Cathedral, London-2013

The **2014** CARAVAN Exhibition of Visual Art brought together renowned Arab and Western artists from Muslim, Christian and Jewish faith backgrounds. With the theme *AMEN-A Prayer for the World*, the art initiative was an aspirational expression for both the people of the Middle East

and the rest of the world. The 48 participating artists (30 from Egypt, of Muslim and Christian backgrounds, and 18 from the West from Jewish and Christian backgrounds) made a highly symbolic statement to the world---that they together are “praying” for peace, respect for the “other” and living and working together in harmony.

Each of the 48 artists was given a life-size fiberglass sculpture in one of four poses of prayer to paint or decorate as they wish--symbolizing the commonality of prayer, serving as a “universal bridge.” Each of the four poses loosely referenced a common prayer pose from each of the main monotheistic religions (Judaism, Islam and Christianity) and the fourth reflected the revelation, peace and wonderment that “prayer” can bring to all.....thereby symbolizing human diversity, community and the many forms that “prayer” can take.

The 2014 CARAVAN exhibition opened first in Cairo, Egypt at the Museum of Modern Art with the 30 AMEN forms by the Egyptian artists. It was officially opened by the former Grand Mufti of Egypt, Sheikh Dr. Ali Gomaa, Christian bishops and the Ministry of Culture. The 30 AMEN forms from Egypt then traveled to the renowned National Cathedral in Washington D.C. to join with 18 AMEN figures painted by artists in the West (from the US and Europe) for a joint exhibition at the cathedral of 48 figures. Then this unique exhibition moved to New York City’s celebrated Cathedral of St. John the Divine, the largest Gothic cathedral in the world known for the arts for a two-month exhibition, drawing many thousands of visitors. The exhibition was sponsored by SODIC, a major real estate firm in Egypt. Over 200,000 people viewed the exhibition at these three venues.

In February **2015**, during the United Nations World Interfaith Harmony Week, CARAVAN’s THE BRIDGE, a traveling East-West exhibition launched in Paris, France with a month-long exhibition at the historic Church of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, in the Latin Quarter, the oldest church in Paris. THE BRIDGE showcases the work (paintings) of 47 premier visual artists; Middle Eastern Arab and Persian artists (of Muslim and Christian backgrounds), as well as Jewish artists, around the theme of what “bridges” us to each other. THE BRIDGE will travel to Europe (Paris, London, Rome, Barcelona, etc), Egypt and the United States for an 18-month period and will be exhibited in a variety of venues (cathedrals, sacred spaces, governmental headquarters, museums, galleries, interfaith centers, etc). THE BRIDGE is an exhibition that takes the same message of intercultural and inter-religious understanding and harmony around the world.

Strategic Need

In the midst of the increasing chasm of discord and misunderstanding that exists between the cultures and creeds of Middle East and the West, our day calls for a new kind of movement; one that builds on what they hold in common and that wages peace on the “other”.

The growing tensions between the Middle East and the West highlight that much work lies ahead toward finding ways that both can live peacefully together. Therefore it is critical that “creative demonstrations of dialogue” be established. It could not be timelier for a peace-building, high visibility public art project such as The Maltese Peace Donkey Project that focuses on fundamental message of intercultural and inter-religious harmony.

The early 20th century Lebanese artist and writer, Kahlil Gibran, who profoundly bridged East and West, beautifully said: “Your neighbor is your other self dwelling behind a wall. In understanding, all walls shall fall down.”

The overall goal of The Maltese Peace Donkey Project, a unique East-West public art initiative, is to use the Arts toward an intercultural and inter-religious interchange, and to enhance understanding, respect and deepen relationships between individuals of different cultural and religious backgrounds from the Middle East and West.

This public art project seeks to play a considered role in the overall goal of seeing an end to sectarian strife, and of a global society that inherently respects and honors diversity, living and working together in harmony.

The Maltese Peace Donkey Project is an expression by a group of noted visual artists from different cultural and religious backgrounds communicating a message about the importance of not just tolerance between the people's of the Middle East and West, but of the importance of living in "peace and with compassion" towards the "other".

Program Overview

Background of how the project originated

The Maltese Peace Donkey Project is a development out of the CARAVAN 2013 "In Peace and with Compassion" public art exhibition that featured 45 life-sized fiberglass donkeys painted by premier Egyptian and Western artists. After being exhibited around Cairo for a month, the donkeys were shipped to the renowned St Paul's Cathedral in London where over 120,000 people came to view them over the course of a month.

The director of the Mdina Biennale, Dr. Giuseppe Schembri-Bonaci, was so inspired by the CARAVAN exhibition in London that he contacted Rev Paul-Gordon Chandler of CARAVAN requesting the six remaining donkeys (from the 2013 exhibition) be included in the Mdina Contemporary Art Biennale. These six donkeys painted by renowned Egyptian and Western artists related to the Middle East that were exhibited in the CARAVAN Exhibition at St Paul's Cathedral-London will be shipped to Malta to be displayed in Mdina during the Biennale. They will then be permanently exhibited in strategic venues in Malta following the Biennale.

"The Maltese Peace Donkey" project

When CARAVAN staff toured the Biennale sites, the idea of strategically using the famous Maltese donkey as an East-West bridging symbol developed. Dr. Bonaci of the Biennale proposed that CARAVAN further cooperate with them to add to the six donkeys coming from the Middle East. It was suggested that life-sized fiberglass donkeys, modeled on the rare Maltese donkey (Hmar Malti) be produced for the Mdina Biennale to be painted/decorated by noted and emerging Maltese and Mediterranean artists.

It was decided to produce 21 Maltese fiberglass donkeys to represent the East-West nature of the Mediterranean: one for each of the 21 Mediterranean nations. Once painted/decorated, the donkeys would be displayed at strategic venues throughout the ancient city of Mdina for the Biennale. Following the Biennale, one donkey would be given to each Mediterranean country to be exhibited as a symbol of the "peace and compassion" that is needed to build bridges between

the East and West in today's global context. Of the 21 Mediterranean countries, 13 have diplomatic presence in Malta and the donkey would be given to that representative entity. For the 8 Mediterranean countries which do not have a diplomatic presence in Malta, the donkey would be shipped to each respective country or their representative somewhere else.

The painted "Maltese Peace Donkeys" by premier artists will serve as "Encounter Points" helping to change negative stereotypes of the "other," toward encouraging intercultural and inter-religious friendships. In this regard, they have a strategic educational and advocacy role of the critical need of building bridges for intercultural and inter-religious harmony.

The distinct symbolism of the Maltese donkey

The renowned and endangered Maltese donkey has great symbolism for East-West relations. Four of these Maltese donkeys were sent by the Marquis de Lafayette of France to General George Washington in 1786 (soon to be the first President of the United States of America) as a gift from the Mediterranean to the West. Hence the Maltese donkey is in many ways an historic "East-West symbol," as its home, Malta is as well.

The donkey in general also has great religious symbolism among the religions of Christianity and Islam (which have made Malta what it is today, represented by the city of Mdina). The donkey symbolizes *peace* in both Islamic and Christian cultures, and is found in both the Bible and in the Qur'an. Examples are numerous, such as both Jesus and the second Muslim caliph, Omar Ibn El Kattab, each riding donkeys when they entered Jerusalem. The donkey also represents the poor, as it is an animal of burden, and this is especially the case in the Middle East and many of the Mediterranean countries. Hence the donkey represents "living in Peace and with Compassion" towards the "other".



The Maltese Donkey

Within Malta the donkey even has more of a religious significance than in other Mediterranean countries. There is a popular ancient Maltese legend of the Christian religion came to Malta from the Middle East through the donkey on which Jesus entered Jerusalem. The legend describes how Jesus' donkey fell into a depression following Jesus' life's end, and so the donkey opted to escape. And by a miracle the sea between Jerusalem and Cyprus turned solid so the donkey could escape. However the donkey found himself ending up in Malta (instead of Cyprus) where he Christianized the Maltese before leaving for Verona, Italy. Even the great Voltaire wrote about this legend in his story "The Donkey of Verona".

The Maltese donkey is truly an historic and contemporary "East-West" symbol.

The Artistic Creation of "The Maltese Donkeys"

For The Maltese Peace Donkey Project, CARAVAN will fashion a mold in Egypt of a life-size fiberglass Maltese donkey. This mold will be made from a donkey sculpted by the premier Egyptian artist Dr. Reda Abdel Rahman, who sculpted the mold for the Egyptian donkey used in CARAVAN's 2013 exhibition. This new mold will be shipped to Malta and then reproduced in fiberglass. These "Maltese donkeys" will then be decorated/painted by a selection of 21 Maltese and visiting foreign participating artists in the Mdina Biennale.



"Maltese Peace Donkey" form
(unpainted)



First two Maltese Donkeys being made
(unpainted)



Comparison between new Maltese Peace Donkey (unpainted) and former Egyptian “Peace & Compassion” Donkey that was exhibited in Cairo & London (painted one)

Educational Impact

The Malta Peace Donkey is not only a public art initiative but also has considerable meaning and value as a catalyst and purveyor of peace locally, in the region and globally.

Serving as a focus for intercultural and inter-religious dialogue, the donkey provides a starting point for discussion and interaction among all age groups. Primarily, it is a creative and entertaining way to introduce children to cultural diversity, intercultural and inter-religious understanding and the need for peace. A variety of age appropriate activities will be developed by the Biennale with the input of the children for use in Malta and the region that directly addresses the particular issues facing both their respective communities and our world.

Activities: Looking at the economic, cultural and symbolic importance of the donkey in the various Mediterranean countries through donkey-related art exhibitions for children, music and

drama performances, discussions, visiting places of cultural and religious significance, creating a twitter profile about the project, updating news and making links to other peace initiatives in the region (e.g. partner schools in other Mediterranean countries), exploring the role that art plays in creating bonds between people and communicating across time as well as geographical boundaries. The educational activities out of Malta will be widened to encompass the whole Mediterranean region.

This initiative provides a unique opportunity to engender understanding and respect for the “other” while also encouraging awareness of the need for intercultural harmony and peace.

Participating Artists

The 21 artists selected for The Maltese Peace Donkey Project will cover a broad geographic area, from throughout the Mediterranean region and Malta itself. Each country of the Mediterranean that is artistically represented in the Biennale will have one or more of their artists selected to paint a fiberglass Maltese donkey. Participating artists will include women and men, from premier contemporary artists from Mediterranean countries to emerging younger Maltese artists. A variety of artistic mediums will be used to decorate/design the donkeys. Also, symbolically, the selected artists will come from the three primary monotheistic faith backgrounds common in the Mediterranean.

Artistic Directors

REV. PAUL-GORDON CHANDLER is the Founder and President of CARAVAN. An author, interfaith advocate, arts patron, social entrepreneur and a U.S Episcopal priest, who grew up in Muslim West Africa, he has lived and worked extensively throughout the Islamic world in leadership roles within faith-based publishing, relief and development agencies and churches. Most recently, he served as the rector of the Church of St John the Baptist-Maadi in Cairo (2003-2013). He has curated exhibitions at St. Paul’s Cathedral, Egypt’s Museum of Modern Art, Washington D.C.’s National Cathedral, and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City.

DR. GIUSEPPE SCHEMBRI BONACI is currently senior lecturer in the Department of History of Art at University of Malta and is the Artistic Director of the Mdina Contemporary Art Biennale. He graduated from the University of Malta, the State University of Kiev, and the State University of Moscow. He also did postgraduate research at the State University of Milano. He specialized in Law, Philosophy and the Arts. Besides being the author of several academic research publications he is also an artist who has exhibited in various Maltese and international venues and galleries.

Sculptor

Reda Abdel Rahman: Born in Ismailia, Egypt and having studied at the University of Minya at the College of Fine Arts, Reda Abdel Rahman is one of Egypt’s leading contemporary artists. Enjoying a prolific and international career in the Arts, his artistic career has taken him around the world, from Latin America to Europe. He has also focused on encouraging emerging Egyptian artists and promoting the Egyptian art scene. He has been integral to the formation of

internationally recognized events such as the Luxor Painting Symposium and the formation of the annual Aswan Sculpture Symposium. He has also led the Fustat workshops in Old Cairo that bring together a range of artists from around the Middle East. Reda was an important founding artist in the CARAVAN arts initiative and is also an ongoing participant artist in the CARAVAN exhibitions, seeking, as a Muslim, to use the Arts as a means to build bridges between the Middle East and West. Reda was the sculptor of the acclaimed Egyptian donkey used for the 2013 CARAVAN “In Peace and Compassion” public art initiative in Cairo and London.

Sponsorship and Program Partners

As in other CARAVAN artistic initiatives, individual, corporate, philanthropic or governmental sponsorship will be sought for The Maltese Peace Donkey Project.

Integral to the implementation of The Maltese Donkey exhibition is a focus on partnership.

For More Information

To request more information on **The Maltese Peace Donkey Project**, please contact CARAVAN directly at: oncaravan@gmail.com