

COMMENTARY

Traveling exhibit gathers art from the Abrahamic faiths

By Paul-Gordon Chandler

In today's climate of increasing prejudice and stereotyping, resulting in what some are calling a new tribalism, it may seem that religion is more of a divisive force than ever. The rise in anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment in the West seem to confirm this impression — from a Jewish cemetery in France recently being vandalized with swastikas to the recent New Zealand mosque massacre. Now, more than ever, it is essential that creative demonstrations of dialogue be developed.

CARAVAN, the East-West peacebuilding arts non-profit, is launching a touring exhibit that aims to demonstrate artistically that religion can be a force of unity. Titled "ABRAHAM: Out of One, Many," the exhibit is presented in partnership with the Episcopal Church Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations.

Referring to the United States' traditional motto of *E pluribus unum* ("Out of many, one"), "ABRAHAM: Out of One, Many" is an art exhibition that reminds us that Christians, Muslims and Jews all have the same family heritage, our ancestor Abraham, and focuses on what we can learn from his life and faith about living together harmoniously.

Abraham is a spiritual figure of distinct significance within the three primary monotheistic faith traditions, whose followers are all referred to as "children of Abraham." The patriarch has much to teach us about welcoming and embracing the "other." In these three faith traditions, the figure of Abraham is seen as a model of hospitality — of welcoming the stranger.

The exhibition involves three acclaimed Middle Eastern contemporary artists from Muslim, Christian and Jewish faith traditions: Sinan Hussein, Qais Al Sindy and Shai Azoulay. Each artist has created five paintings that interpret specific themes from Abraham's life for our contemporary context.

For artist Qais Al Sindy, a Chaldean Christian from Iraq, participating in the exhibition has special significance. Reflecting on his artwork in the exhibition, Qais said, "Abraham was a Chaldean as well, coming originally from Ur of the Chaldees, which is now called Nassiriya, a governorate in Iraq situated along the banks of the Euphrates River, about 225 miles southeast of Baghdad. I bought an old Nassiriyan shepherd's cloak made of sheep wool. Then, I cut the cloak into pieces and pasted some of them on the canvases for Abraham's clothes. I wanted to bring the spirit and soul of this great prophet through the material of his native land."

The imaginative art of Sinan Hussein, an artist also from Iraq but of Muslim background, leads the viewer to reflect deeply on Abraham's contemporary significance. About his painting titled "Abraham and Ishmael's Birth," Sinan said, "In my painting, I am attempting to move beyond the traditional understanding found in the Qur'an and the other monotheistic religions, into its contemporary meaning for us now. This is what I am trying to do in my depiction of Ishmael's birth."



Hussein

Sinan Hussein, Abraham and Ishmael's Birth, mixed media on canvas.



Azoulay

Shai Azoulay, Abraham's Circle of Love, oil on canvas.

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— Leonard Bernstein

represents something that connects people from all backgrounds and breaks down all walls. In a circle we become one. This is something Abraham teaches us."

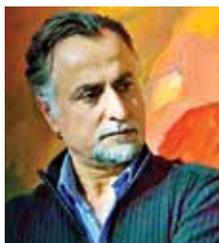
Leonard Bernstein, the renowned late Jewish composer and conductor, said, "the point is, art never stopped a war ... Art cannot change events. But it can change people. It can affect people so that they are changed — they then act in a way that may affect the course of events...by the way they behave, the way they think."

"ABRAHAM: Out of One, Many" will begin its 20-month tour of sacred spaces on May 3, 2019 in Rome at the historic church of St Paul's Within the Walls (Episcopal). It will be then be showcased over the summer in France at the American Cathedral in Paris and in Edinburgh at St. Cuthbert's Church, as part of the Just Festival during the Edinburgh Art Festival. In the fall of 2019, it will begin touring cathedrals and sacred spaces in the U.S. through 2020, with the first two venues being the Tri-Faith Initiative in Omaha, Nebraska and St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral in Boston. In each venue, the exhibition will serve as a catalyst for the local Christian, Muslim and Jewish communities to

work together and develop programming focused on what we can learn from Abraham on living together peacefully. ■

The Rev. Canon Paul-Gordon Chandler is an appointed mission partner of the Episcopal Church and president/CEO of CARAVAN.

For more information on *ABRAHAM: Out of One, Many*, see: www.oncaravan.org/abraham



Al Sindy

Qais Al Sindy, Abraham and Isaac, detail of a sketch-oil on fine art paper.



Shai Azoulay, a celebrated Jewish artist who was previously featured at the Frieze Art Fair and was awarded The Moses Prize from the Jerusalem Artist House, has brought his heritage and contemporary culture into some of his work. His style moves playfully, albeit mystically, back and forth between the figurative and the abstract. In his artistic depiction of Abraham's sacrificial love for God and others, Shai's energetic painting shows the patriarch on a flying carpet observing a large circle dance whose participants illustrate the diversity of our world. About the painting, Shai remarks, "Circle dancing is very much part of Jewish culture. For me the circle