

Elephants, Fishes and Saint George

The UN's Art Collection Reflect the World "Warts and All"

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That there is a potential contradiction between politics and art can be thoroughly studied at UN Headquarters in New York. Sculptures, tapestries, paintings and other objects of varying quality are exhibited there. They were gifted to the UN by its Member States over the past 69 years and sometimes threatened to turn the UN building into a global kitsch center. This article portrays some of the art works, for example, the Soviet sculpture ›Swords into Ploughshares‹ or the knotted revolver, as some of the most popular works, because of their clear messages. It also presents art works that would readily be accepted by renowned museums in the world, for instance, Chagall's stained glass window or Hepworth's ›Single Form‹. Lastly, the article tells the story behind some of the more bizarre pieces, like a cast elephant and a rotten fish, and explains the often difficult diplomacy applied by UN officials in managing the gifts.

United Nations headquarters is officially the heart of an international organization devoted to peace and security, not the world's art gallery. However, from the beginning, it has also been *de facto* an international art museum, housing no less than 311 murals, sculptures, monuments, mosaics, paintings, tapestries and relics donated by the nations of the world. That gives its collection an eclectic diversity—even if does not always guarantee quality. UN officials are loth to member governments on any matter, and member states' taste in art is often as unreliable as their political judgments.

As member nations wanted to celebrate the new organization, they plied it with gifts. *De gustibus non est disputandum*, the Romans said, so the UN's collection represents the diversity of each member's art—no matter how questionable to others. In the beginning, the UN actively sought gifts, and the former National Council for US Art was set up to commission and pay for

adornments like Ezio Martinelli's "Untitled" abstract sculpture on the side of the General Assembly Hall. Donated in the 1960s, it is recognizably a gift of its time.

That worked when the organization was a cozy coterie of less than sixty nations, but as the number of member states mushroomed with decolonization, many new members wanted to leave their mark at this center of world attention. Some of these, such as Nigerian sculptor Ben Enwonyu's "Anyanwu," are striking, powerful and popular non-Western artworks, which always stop visitors in their tracks. Others are much less universal in their appeal, making the cynic wonder about the relationship of the artists to their political establishments.

From the early days there was always a potential contradiction between politics and art, as concerned Secretariat officials tried to stop UN headquarters becoming the global kitsch center. Fittingly, Hammarskjöld's biographer Sir Brian Urquhart was for many years in charge of the Committee that oversaw the acceptance and placing of the gifts. An immediate constraint was the decision to accept only one accession for each member country, thereby forestalling an "Art Race" to match the arms race as vying nations tried to outdo each other. That is still the established rule.

In the old days, there were attempts to harness outside art experts to the arts committee, but they left in protest when they found they were supposed to rubber stamp politically motivated decisions made by senior officials. The redoubtable Sir Brian who headed the committee after 1975 could only mitigate, not prevent, the eccentric tastes of member states being inflicted. He candidly told the New York Times in 1983, that there were some "monstrosities" in the collection.¹

The earlier committee had diplomatically accepted some gifts with fulsome gratitude and committed them straight to storage. Also in storage was the gift from the Comoros of a pickled Coelacanth, the "fossil fish" supposed to be long extinct. But the preservative was failing and its decaying remains were entombed in storage.

In general, few galleries using contemporary aesthetic criteria for their acquisitions would display the thickset muscle-bulging Socialist Realist sculptures donated by former East Bloc countries, but they give an authenticity to the United Nations collection as "we, the governments of the world" with their official styles. The GDR's "Rising Man" (Der Aufsteigende) by Fritz Cremer and the Soviet sculptor Evgeny Vuchetich "Let us Beat Swords into ploughshares" are indeed symbolic of the UN's message even as their muscularity is redolent of the regimes that donated them.

¹ William G. Blair, U.N. Art Collection, Like the U.N., Keeps Growing, New York Times, 13.3.1983.

Such “orphan” donations make the collection somehow significant. Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, the GDR and the USSR are no more. Berlin has a interesting political squabble ahead if Cremer ever needs repair. The UN’s budget is under close and critical scrutiny so it cannot spend on refurbishment or restoration, so the cost must be met by the donor nation—whose current leaders, in Berlin or elsewhere, might not share the tastes of a bygone age and overthrown regime.

With the collection being swirled around to protect it during the current renovation, the political and artistic diversity of the collection becomes more noticeable as exhibits that had blended into the background. It suddenly took a new significance from incongruous juxtapositions that draw attention to just how difficult it is to extract any curatorial theme.

Protecting the works was in itself a mammoth task. The mural by the Norwegian artist Per Krohg in the Security Council Chamber had to be carefully removed to protect it during rebuilding, but the mural in the third floor lobby of the Conference Building by Spanish artist José Vela Zanetti, could not be moved and had to be carefully wrapped and protected as work went on around it.

Many of the sculptures had to be moved—an indeed massive task. Even with rebuilding nearing completion, parts of the North Lawn look like a builder’s yard. Massive artifacts are scattered across the grass, lined up reclining looking like gargantuan casualties with stray limbs poking from under the green body-bag like coverings. Some seem trusted to risk the elements - including the intact section of the Berlin Wall with its footings and foundations.

The Wall segment ironically blocks the view of the Soviet contribution, of beating Swords into Ploughshares. It is on the walk to the iconic Peace Bell, with its pagoda canopy donated by Japan looks almost as if it were intended to be on the grass overlooking the East River and U Thant Island - if one had not walked past the remnants of the Japanese Garden in the forecourt of the building and remembered the annual ceremony of ringing the bell on UN Day. That in turn is close to the massive but skeletal Irish monument to the millions who migrated across the ocean - one of the more recent donations John Behan’s “Arrival.” Weighing eleven tons and depicting 150 separate figures, it is actually one of the more human, and humane, representations in the collection. Luckily it could stay in situ during rebuilding.

Some of the objects that have spent time in exile in the gardens have now been returned to their former sites. This year, one of the artworks most associated with the UN, Barbara

Hepworth's "Single Form" six and half meters of bronze, reappeared in the forecourt it had dominated for over half a century.

UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld was a genuine patron of the arts, and was personally involved in acquiring some of the artwork most associated with the UN - such as the Hepworth whose work he had admired. Intended as a memorial to him, it has extra significance since his taste in turn elicited many of the more abstract modern sculptures that bedeck the headquarters complex. One of the attractions of the art collection is that much of it is almost a trip in time as it is in political geography. Like the building itself, it transports us to an era in art that is considered "Modern" just as the building itself is "Modern" architecture. In both cases "Modern" now has paradoxical connotations of being slightly old-fashioned.

However, some of those most likely to be scorned are often popular with the tourists as they file in. Hideous though it might be to aesthetes, Zurab Tsereteli's bronze sculpture "Good Defeats Evil" always excites attention. Donated by the Soviet Union in October 1990, it shows a musclebound recognizably Soviet St George lancing a dragon consisting of remnants of SS-20 and Pershing II missiles.

Unfortunately some might say, it was not covered or moved but continues to dominate the entrance to the temporary buildings. In front of the General Assembly, Luxembourg's gift of Swedish sculptor Carl Frederik Reuterswärd's "Non-violence", the knotted pistol with its eloquent message, might seem simplistic to critics. But it is magnet for the untold numbers of tourists. They want to be photographed next to a work that graphically sums up the UN's message more than many of the more abstract yet renowned works bedecking the international enclave.

Similarly Iran's woven portraits of secretaries-general past and present always attract attention as tourists wait for their tickets for the tours—and are in fact more representationally recognizable than the official oil paintings in the Lobby of the Secretariat building which are sometimes commissioned by the secretaries-general themselves and usually privately funded. Kurt Waldheim's formal academic style is perhaps the most popular, with Dag Hammarskjöld's and Javier Pérez de Cuéllar's being considered confusing.

While the politics provided one fault line, it is perhaps paradoxical that the huge abstract murals on the wall of the General Assembly hall should have been designed by Fernand Léger, who UN rumor says did not think he would be allowed into the US for his communist leanings - but whose work would not have been allowed into the Soviet Union for its decadent abstraction. Wallace Harrison, the American on the architectural team commissioned the work

and at Léger's suggestion got an American former student of his, Bruce Gregory with the work, paid for by the UNA-USA, being completed at breakneck speed in a month to beat the opening of the building. Not a great patron of modern art, President Harry Truman declared that one of them reminded him of "scrambled eggs" and the other of "Swiss cheese."

But such divisions crossed continents. One of the most popular exhibits inside the building is the Norman Rockwell mosaic with its clarity of message and intent—donated by none other than Nancy Reagan and now dominating the entrance to the ECOSOC chamber whose debates would mostly be thought crime for her husband's supporters.

The visitor's hall to the General Assembly typifies the highs and lows of the collection. Going through doors with Ernest Cormier bas reliefs more reminiscent of the interwar art of the Palais des Nations in Geneva, visitors see a replica of Sputnik hanging in the air above a statue of Zeus, while visitors file past a moon rock in a glass case from the US.

But then the intrepid will discover the meditation room, dominated by Marc Chagall's stained glass memorial to Dag Hammarskjöld, which mesmerizes even the most representationally minded art lover. Non-denominational, the chapel does have a numinous tranquility that affects even non-believers, but to preserve its peace it is for solitary visitors rather than tour groups, so perhaps not as many people see it as should.

In contrast, perhaps the most iconic and widely seen of the UN art works is the tapestry of Picasso's famous anti-war painting "Guernica" which has hung outside the Security Council for so long and appears almost every day in the world's media. Even in a negative way, it shows the power of art since during Bush and Blair's war in the Gulf in 2003, it was considered inappropriate for American and British representatives to talk to the press in front of this stark reminder of the consequences of what they were doing, so it was shielded from the cameras. Abstract though it is, its powerful imagery was too much—and is a fitting reminder to the diplomats entering the chamber of the consequences of their failures.

Many of these issues of aesthetics and politics came together in Sir Brian's swan song. His last big effort was an attempt to stop the Elephant, which represented one end of the spectrum of abstract to realist art that makes up the UN collection. Mihail Simeonov, a Bulgarian sculptor, in 1980 had had the idea of felling an African elephant with narcotic darts and making a mold in latex, to be cast later in bronze - five tons of it. The idea was taken up by Austrian former Secretary General of the Socialist International Hans Janitschek who worked at the UN. He set up the "Cast the Elephant Trust" as a not-for-profit. The Secretariat breathed a sigh of relief—they were under no obligation to accept gifts from NGOs. They also argued that however noble,

the UN was about “We, the Peoples” not “We, the Pachyderms” and that it was inappropriate—and privately, they argued, rather ugly.

The UN bureaucracy felt, with some justice, that headquarters was already bulging with white elephants donated by member governments and that a real bronze one would be pushing it. However, Janitschek enlisted three elephant-populated countries as sponsors, Nepal, Malawi and Namibia, so the UN had to give way, but their revenge was to site it in a wooded copse in a corner of the UN gardens, as far away from the actual building as possible, since they claimed it was too heavy to place above any of the wide-spread basements under the UN grounds.

It had taken 18 years to get the elephant into position, and the night before Kofi Annan was to unveil the statue, his chef de cabinet, Iqbal Riza, took a watchful walk to check, and peering under the veil noticed that the bull elephant looked like it had a fifth leg—much thicker than the trunk. He promptly ordered up a coy hedge of shrubs to be planted around it to spare the secretary-general embarrassment which of course excited a controversy all of its own. But it still looks like it has five legs.

In some ways, pachyderms haunt the UN’s art collection. Everyone seems too polite to point out the Chinese gift—the huge ivory carving celebrating the opening of the Chengtu-Kunming Railway, a period piece from 1974 representing a combination of Mao’s proletarian triumphalism and traditional Chinese artistry, contains the ivory from no less than eight dead elephants. It would probably be illegal to transport internationally now. It is fortunately less prominent than the huge tapestry of the Great Wall which adorns the wall of the Delegate’s Lounge - and was recently cleaned to clear the tobacco smoke and alcohol fumes of a half century for most of which smoking was illegal in the UN.

Littering the corridors of the building are some of the most tasteless donations, invariably golden-hued, from the Arab oil states, bejeweled golden palm trees and lamps. At least Kazakhstan’s Golden Man is a replica of a fascinating archeological find of the golden suit of a former ruler, even if it conjures up uncharitable thoughts about the wealth amassed by the current President.

The committee is now composed almost entirely of UN officials, with the addition of former US Ambassador Joseph Verner Reed, as a special advisor to the SG, who has also tried to hold out some of the more egregious offerings. It has not been overworked of late, since there has been a moratorium on new donations from 2008 until the reconstruction is completed next year.

The committee's remit is now being reconsidered, which is perhaps too late. With the conservatism of officialdom, many of the exhibits are clearly being returned to their former sites where the random decisions and pressures of sixty years had placed them.

On the one hand, there is the attraction of trying to curate such an eclectic, not to mention eccentric collection, to display it with some grand aesthetic master plan. But on the other hand part of its attraction is the serendipity, how the different vectors of taste, politics and ergonomics came together to produce such an irreproducible representation of global governmental whim and taste on such a scale.

Part of the mystique of the United Nations has always been its public image, its manifestation as a body that stands above individual governments and represents the world. That is why it is one of the world's great tourist destinations, and, whether by incremental accident or design, the art collection does indeed represent the world "warts and all" as Oliver Cromwell ordered his portrait painter to do.

Good, bad, abstract or realist, folk art or clever artisanship, the collection does indeed encompass the widest range of the world's artists.