

“Art For Peace”
Haiti
Colby College
Keerthi Martyn Class of 2022

Background:

Haiti has always been a country that I have been intrigued by. The development of Haiti as a nation is one that is long and complicated, and one that cannot be told simply through the history books. It is highlighted by a culture that balances a storytelling and reflective aspect of the past, an enjoyment of the present, and an audacious hope that provides an outlook for the future.

I first proposed this project in the fall of 2020. At this point, I had been an intern at Education Haiti for a year, an organization which supports the FTSJS, a college of social work located in Bon Repos, Haiti. It was in the process of organizing an art auction fundraiser for the school that I was inspired to propose this project. Having immersed myself with Haitian art and having connected with a group of artists who told their captivating stories, I began to reflect on the role that art can play for the prospect for peace in Haiti.

The original project proposed the organization of an art symposium in the summer of 2021 on the campus of the FTSJS in Haiti. This symposium would have brought together Haitian artists as well as faculty and staff at the school to showcase the artist's work as well as to play host to discussions on the role that art can play at the micro, meso, and macro levels of social work in Haiti. Throughout the organization of the project, my time in Haiti would have been spent traveling around Haiti to the art centers of Cap-Haïtien and Jacmel, where I would meet the artists that I had connected with prior to start of the project.

Challenges:

The past 2 years have been a true test of resiliency for Haiti as a nation. From the political and social turmoil that gripped the nation with the assassination of the President, to the devastating earthquake that hit in August, to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Haiti is a nation that has faced much turbulence in recent memory. Together, these unfortunate and unforeseen circumstances prevented travel to Haiti to carry out this project, due to safety concerns.

As I was monitoring the situation on the ground in Haiti with hopes that I would be able to go, I was in the meantime making plans to move the project to an online format. Like the art symposium that I had planned to organize, I wanted to stick to the primary goal of providing a platform for the artists to showcase their art and talk about the role of their work to the prospects for peace in Haiti.

I initially proposed hosting an online video event that would allow these artists to do this in a live setting. However, due to the development of events on the ground in Haiti, many of the artists that I had reached out to were unable to continue with the project for several reasons. In addition to this, infrastructural problems of reliable internet access made this event even more difficult to carry out in this format. Furthermore, as events in Haiti deteriorated as the summer went on, communication on the ground was also difficult and sparse.

Implementation:

After the first plan for online event was abandoned, I came up with another proposal to create a short documentary film that would involve Haitian filmmakers traveling to the artists' locations and interviewing them about their work. Working with Haitian filmmaker Vincent Theodore, I was able to produce a film that showcased three Haitian artists; a cartoonist, a sculptor, and a painter.

The first artist that was showcased was Jerry Bousiko, who is an artist based out of the Port-Au-Prince area. A self-taught graphic designer and cartoonist, Jerry developed a career as an editorial cartoonist for various newspapers in Haiti. He is a member of Cartooning for Peace, which is an international organization that holds a collection of news cartoons in newspapers around the world. Jerry's cartoons provide an interesting angle of how peace advocacy can take on various forms amidst challenges to free speech.

The second artist in the film was Woody Calamite, known as Filipo. Filipo is a Haitian sculptor and activist who uses his work to shape collective memory around slavery and abolition narratives that

have been silenced or misconstrued. In his recent work, Filipo focused on highlighting former Haitian slave Modeste Testas, sculpted in bronze. He also completed a sculpture of George Floyd in the wake of his death in 2020. He believes public sculptures are critical mechanisms for future generations and society in Haiti and around the world to understand the complexities of slavery and violence, and the voices of accountability.

The final artist that was featured in the film was that of Laudnz Dayenka André, an artist based out of Cap-Haïtien. Only 16 years old, she works with the Cap-Haïtien-based organization *Kreyatis*, where she specializes in calligraphy and painting. Her artwork offers a striking perspective on the role of art as well as youth empowerment towards the quest for peace in Haiti.

In the process of creating the film, I reached out to all of these artists ahead of time to learn more about their stories as well as interest in social work and peace in Haiti. I then came up with a list of questions, tailored to each artist and their work, which were sent to the filmmakers. These included questions regarding their artistic influences, the role of art in shaping collective memory, and what “peace” means to them. After receiving these questions, the filmmakers traveled to the various locations of the artists in Haiti and interviewed them.

Outlook:

In working with these artists, I have been able to provide a platform for them to showcase their impactful work. In a contentious period of time in Haiti, their work is ever the more necessary to highlight, due to their inherent focus on the achievement of peace. In the long term, it is the hope that these artists will continue to build upon the relationships they have developed with the FTSJS, to implement an art-based social work curriculum into the school.

Throughout the project, I’ve had to contend with the idea of what peace truly is. I think my line of thinking of what peace is has been guided by my work with the college of social work in Haiti. As promoted by the FTSJS, social work is something that can be achieved at varying levels of society, from the micro-based individual level to the meso-based community level, to the macro-based national and international levels. To me, peace is something that can exist at all three of those levels. Whether it be an individual level of reflective peace, peace in solidarity with family or community members, or peace achieved for the collective of a nation, peace is something that can come in different forms, and transcend throughout a society.

For a nation that has gone through so much throughout its history, let alone the past year, the desire for peace is something that has always remained unrelenting. This project showcased this exact resiliency and demonstrated the necessity of exploring different avenues for peace. As I’ve learned throughout this project, art is one of those critical avenues that can be used as a means of telling a story of the past, manifesting the present, and providing hope for the future.

