

Visualising Peace: A Virtual Museum

Written by Federica Consiglio, Alice König and Jenny Oberholzter

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Let us begin with a quick virtual tour through a physical space: the ground floor of the British Museum in London. Turning left from the main entrance, you will find yourself in the galleries that house artefacts from ancient Greece and Rome and the ancient Near East. There are marble statues, remnants of temples and tombs, great sculptural reliefs, pieces of armour and weaponry, painted vases, and items of jewellery, among many other objects. Everywhere you look, from the carved stone panels that once adorned palaces in Nimrud and Nineveh, to Greek temple friezes, to domestic pots and pans, you can see spears bristling, swords drawn, archers flexing their bows, chariots driving into battle, and infantry and cavalry, men and mythical creatures, locked in mortal combat. Some war dead are mourned, others are triumphed over; captives are marched in columns, while gods of war are invoked. There are also scenes of leisure – hunting, feasting, music-making – and glimpses of civic, religious and domestic life far from the battlefield. But you will struggle to find any self-conscious representations of peace or peace-building on display, beyond some limited narratives of conflict resolution inherent in images of victory or celebrations of conquest. Visitors quickly become literate in the iconography of war and violence, and items in multiple rooms join forces to tell a story that draws compelling connections between favourable gods, strong political leadership, military force, and community prosperity. By contrast, ideas of peace – what it looked like, how it was experienced, and how it was made – remain blurred, out of focus, hard to visualise.

This is not simply because many of the artefacts on display in these galleries mythologise war or amplify top-down forms of conflict-resolution and the advantages of belligerent leadership. For centuries, the curation of these artefacts has allowed elite perspectives, geopolitics and an obsession with empire to dominate, in step with wider trends in historical storytelling. Information board after information board focuses our attention on those in power, on threats to their sovereignty, on shifting territorial boundaries, and on stories of imperial expansion or decline, building a picture of human history in which ‘great civilisations’ lurch from one conflict to the next. For instance:

‘The age of empire’ (Early New Kingdom, 18th Dynasty, c. 1550-1295 BC): ‘Ahmose II of Thebes defeated the Hyksos at their northern capital Avaris, reuniting the country. Conquests by his successors made Egypt the dominant empire of the ancient world...’

‘Greek and Roman rule in Egypt’ (Greco-Roman period, 332 BC – AD 395): ‘After his triumphant entry into Egypt, Alexander the Great pursued his conquest of the Persian Empire...’

Of in-between times – war’s aftermath, the lull between clashes, periods of peace – we can see remarkably little. References to trade, agriculture and artistic production tend to be framed in relation to war (as threatened by it, or as by-products of imperial expansion); and the work that individuals and communities did to navigate, avoid or recover from the conflicts of their era is hardly touched upon. We cannot place all the blame on the artefacts themselves; opportunities have been missed in the curation and communication process to raise questions about the habits of visualising war which these objects promote and to explore ancient experiences and discourses of peace.

This is not a strange quirk either of antiquity or of this particular museum. In the 21st century, we are surrounded by images and narratives of war, but exposed to far fewer representations or discussions of peace. It is not the case that such representations do not exist; rather, they are not framed or foregrounded in ways that impact our consciousness as much as narratives of war do. As John Gittings (among others) has observed, if you walk into the average high

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street bookshop you will likely find a 'military history' section, but no equivalent shelf space devoted to (say) the politics of peace. While many bookshops stock both fact and fiction titles that reflect on different aspects of peace and peace-making – from inner peace to international negotiations – they are usually dispersed across different sections, and not easily visible, accessible or promoted in the way that clusters of books on war are. A quick browse for films online will turn up hundreds under the popular category 'war film', a best-selling genre that constructs and deconstructs war in many different guises, making it feel close, familiar, known (while socialising us into viewing it for and as entertainment). By contrast, films that narrate post-conflict recovery, reconciliation, harmonious living, future aspirations, friendship across divides, and other such aspects of finding or making peace, do not have a recognisable classification that unites or amplifies them. Scattered across comedy, period drama, action adventure, fantasy, science fiction and romance, they get us thinking about all sorts of phenomena, but they are rarely produced or marketed in ways that bring peace itself into focus. 'Peace art' and 'peace journalism' are more established endeavours; even so, they do not have the same centuries-old traditions behind them as 'war art' and 'war reporting', and they have not gained as much traction amongst commissioners or consumers. Frank Möller and David Shim make similar points about war/peace photography. Why does this matter? One objection to setting up 'peace films' as a meaningful category is that the range of works we might classify under that label is too nebulous, too difficult to determine. Arguably, however, one reason for this is that we do not have strong traditions of peace storytelling, which would help us recognise 'peace' when we see it and make us more 'peace literate'. The more we discuss and explore a concept, the more opportunities we have to understand it; but the reverse is also true. The media that shape us individually and collectively rarely get us wrestling with peace as a concept; as a result, we struggle to visualise or grasp it, and so tell fewer stories about it, and so the cycle goes on.

Our Museum of Peace aims to make a modest contribution to wider efforts to render peace and peace-making more visible, more discussed, and better understood. An output of the wider Visualising War and Peace project, based at the University of St Andrews, this virtual exhibition space has been designed and developed by a student research team, mentored by Alice König and Jenny Oberholzter. The project is grounded in an understanding of narratives as world-building. The tales we tell, the images we share, and the songs we sing reflect the worlds we live in; but they also help to shape them, by impacting how individuals and groups think, feel and behave. For us, visualising war or peace goes well beyond simply 'picturing' either: it involves evoking, figuring, engendering and ultimately realising them: narrating war and peace into (certain ways of) being. Research on this 'feedback loop' between narrative and reality has been advanced by several recent scholarly trends, including the 'visual turn' in the study of global politics, the 'narrative turn' in International Relations (from novels to TV to music videos and beyond), growing attention to 'the politics of the everyday', and advances in critical feminist and postcolonial approaches. Drawing on all of these, our aim is to harness the power of story-sharing to illuminate different habits of visualising peace and their influence (actual or potential) on how it is experienced, promoted, created and sustained. Our project is both disruptive of entrenched habits and generative of new or different ways of thinking about peace. By juxtaposing a myriad of different manifestations of peace, we aim to question, challenge and stretch assumptions and interpretative frameworks; and we hope that our array of 'exhibits' not only helps to make peace more visible and more broadly understood but also more tangible and realisable in the everyday.

The Ethics of Visualising Peace

In collating and curating narratives of peace from different periods, places and contexts, we have tried to be mindful of several ethical pitfalls. Peace, or at least the word as used by some, is not necessarily a good thing for many, in practice. Calls for peaceful solutions in response to violent state-sponsored actions are difficult to take seriously when (for instance) peaceful protestors are sentenced to death in Iran. All around the world, there are spoken and unspoken demands that protests and activism must conform to a perfect vision of peace in order to be taken seriously; similarly, there is regular, widespread insistence that people who are victimized should respond peacefully or be deemed unworthy of justice. History is littered with examples of movements resorting to arms despite their non-violent roots (Cobb: 2015); and we have seen the risks of rigid adherence to pacifist positions not just over the past few decades but quite literally during the length of the Visualising Peace project so far.

As the spring term of 2022 began, Russian troops massed outside the Ukrainian border. Young people, often the same age as many of the students involved in this project, joined military units to help defend the Ukrainian state.

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Many would die, have died, are dying and will die. They will not have the chance to finish their university terms, to have first jobs after a degree, and to mature in the ways that our team of students have and will. Discussions of what it means to be a pacifist, to refuse to engage in acts of violence and more were thrown into harsh relief in a country just a three-hour flight away. And this has been true not only for potential soldiers. As St Andrews alumna Darya Tsymbalyuk and her colleague Iryna Zamuruieva have written: 'As feminists, we are critical of militarisation; but we believe that pacifism will kill and that Russia's war crimes have left us with no option... but to campaign for more military aid to be able to defend ourselves and survive.'

Similar conflicts have been on-going elsewhere in the world. The combination of internet access, social media usage, and targeted Ukrainian engagement with the English-speaking public has meant that this war has been unfolding in very visible ways, while other events such as the war and famine in Yemen, the aftermath of the American exit from Afghanistan, or the daily degradation of life under Israeli Occupation have not. The spotlight on Ukraine, as opposed to all of the other conflicts, can and should be interrogated at length. However, for a UK-based research team it offered a valuable, concrete example of what normally abstract ideas might mean in the life of someone nearby. Watching this war unfold got us exploring 'everyday peace', pockets of peace, and care and love amid conflict, among other topics; but it also saw us questioning ideals, projections and fantasies of peace, pacifism, and how these concepts can be weaponized. Pacifism as a set of ideals holds appeal; pacifism as a practice in the face of an invasion may make one question its foundational principles.

What does it mean to request that people under military occupation in Gaza or Mariupol respond peacefully as they come under fire, condemning children for throwing rocks? What does 'peace' mean when law enforcement breaks into homes at Wet'suwet'en with axes and chainsaws, telling residents that they are disturbing the peace? When protesters are told to disassemble in Edinburgh or London or Portland and met with arrest or violence? If we include only those stories and images of peace that occur in certain popular canons, or in the history books we learned from in school, the narratives offered are of questionable value; history is written by the victor, and more often than not, that victor became the victor through force of arms. The struggle for equality, justice, restitution, or reparation may be deemed an offense against peace, undermining the status quo in the name of chaos. But the call, 'No Justice, No Peace' reminds us that without justice, no true, lasting peace is possible; without justice, 'peace' is not peace for everyone, nor should it be. Time might allow for Truth and Reconciliation committees and a re-evaluation of events, but even with careful thought, we may forget an important question: Whose peace are we allowing to take centre stage?

A Kaleidoscope of Perspectives

When developing our virtual Museum of Peace, it was important not to simply staff it with a wide range of researchers and trust that that would be enough, but to be well-aware of our collective positionality. The members of our student and staff team come from many countries, ethnic groups, backgrounds, religions, and socioeconomic classes, but we are still very much positioned within a privileged space in Western, specifically British academia. The ways in which most of us have trained and been educated privileges certain perspectives, and this is something we cannot undo and should not deny. That said, in being mindful of it, we can address our inherent biases to a certain extent. Sitting inside an academic institution, we know that we are often primed to seek out some sources, and not others; for that reason, we have made a conscious effort to listen to voices beyond the academy and to explore representations of peace in less 'mainstream' media. Our museum features graffiti, children's drawings, music, dance, online games, yogic practices, autoethnography, cyber activism, environmental movements, and fashion, alongside prayer, poetry, film, novels, history, political debate and scholarship. As we continue to add new entries, we are trying to ensure broader representation across genders, generations, regions, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Inevitably, this remains a work in progress.

We have also tried to make a virtue out of individual positionality and disciplinary diversity. The student researchers involved in developing our Museum of Peace were drawn from different year-groups and subject areas (Arabic, Art History, Classics, Comparative Literature, English, Film Studies, History, IR, Psychology, Social Anthropology and Sustainable Development). This led to fascinating classroom conversations, as ideas and approaches in one subject prompted us to rethink concepts, theoretical frameworks or methodologies in another. For example, the 'local turn' in

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International Relations helped researchers in Classics and History to interrogate the top-down, elite, male-gendered perspectives from which peace and peace-building have traditionally been studied in their subject areas, and to excavate more vernacular experiences of peace and peace-making in the past. At the same time, trends in English and Film Studies which foreground individual storytelling and personalised viewpoints encouraged researchers based in IR to decouple the study of peace from macro politics, armed conflict and 'security' and to explore the whole spectrum from inner- to geopolitical peace.

As well as making us more 'bias-aware' in selecting and curating our chosen visualisations of peace, these exchanges led to our development of The Visualising Peace Library – an online resource designed to encourage more knowledge exchange, not only between different disciplines but also between academia and practice. While academics undoubtedly play an important role in shaping our understanding of and approaches to peace, the world of university research can sometimes feel detached from practical societal concerns, and peace practitioners can find critical theory difficult to access or implement on the ground (Ragandang: 2021). Our museum aims to bridge the divide, doing work of value for many different kinds of visitor. Embracing the concept of 'citizen scholarship' (research that embraces the porous relationship between scholarship and society, similar to 'citizen science'), we use our virtual exhibition space to bring diverse perspectives into a shared, accessible arena, in the hope of generating more knowledge-exchange and dialogue between (e.g.) academics, peace campaigners, space scientists, military strategists, teachers, journalists, artists, game designers, museum curators, and many others in the wider world. While Peace Museums do exist around the globe, such as the International Peace Museum or the Kyoto Museum for World Peace, access to them is necessarily limited to those who either live in the area or have the means to travel. However large, their physical dimensions also set a limit to the volume, range and kinds of materials that can be on display. Our online platform not only democratizes access but invites the visitor to become a co-curator with us, by offering opportunities for feedback and interaction. As you will notice as you browse our exhibits, each entry ends with a set of questions, designed to prompt reflect and elicit responses.

As our mission statement underlines:

Our aim is not to promote any one particular vision of peace... Our aim is to spark more conversation about what peace 'looks like' to each of us, where it can be found, how it can be promoted, how it gets represented, and what peace-making and peace-keeping actually involve. We think that talking about different manifestations of peace is an important step in empowering everyone to play a part in fostering it, no matter who they are or where they come from.

Each contributor to our museum has added visualisations of peace based on their own areas of expertise and interest – from top-down to grassroots, utopian to dystopian, belligerent to pacifist, geopolitical to personal, aftermath to futures thinking. Personal, creative projects (graphic design, pencil sketches, creative writing, and interpretative dance) sit alongside analysis of other people's or organisation's visualisations (for instance, Pentagon Peace Pals; Quaker philosophies; Padre Steve's Christmas Journey; the Green Mosul Initiative; and Emily Mayhew's Hope in a Jar). Take, for example, Marios Diakourtis' black-and-white drawings, inspired by poems that reflect on the struggle to find peace after forced displacement. As he explains, 'Picasso used the freedom and abstraction of modernism to show the complexity, chaos and atrocities of war; but I think that peace can be just as complex and convoluted, hence I chose to follow a similar style.' His black and white colour scheme is designed to evoke but also challenge black-and-white conceptions of peace as simply the binary opposite of war; indeed, he has packed symbolism into his drawings which aim to show that experiences of peace and war can be synchronous. As he puts it, 'This is exactly how all the poets I have read visualise peace for refugees and forced migrants: as liminal figures that mediate between conflict and peace.'

Another item in our museum features children's views on peace. By the time we reach adulthood, we have often been socialised into very particular ways of thinking about peace. Living in the UK, for example, people grow up learning about – and celebrating – Armistice Day, 'Victory in Europe Day' and other events and anniversaries connected with the end of the First and Second World Wars. Ideas of peace feature in the lyrics of popular music; and children read books and watch films such as *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Harry Potter* or *Lord of the Rings*, stories which end happily, with conflict resolution and calm, after violence and disorder. Alongside coverage of contemporary conflicts, they may have seen footage of anti-war protests, with an array of peace

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symbols from Picasso's iconic dove to the 'peace and love' sign designed in the 1950s for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). And they may have heard calls for world peace or community harmony in religious contexts. But how do children themselves imagine, understand and describe peace themselves? The smells, tastes and sounds which they mentioned in conversations with our researchers made it clear how strongly the children we interviewed connected peace with two things: home and happiness. Lollipops, Phish Food ice cream, macaroni, and pie... comfort food and treats. Hugs with their family were mentioned several times. They talked a little of peace as something quiet and contemplative: for example, several described being curled up with a book as a peaceful experience, while another described sitting still in the garden at night while swifts swooped by. But they also chatted excitedly about trampoline time, doing front flips, going to theme parks and playing with friends as peaceful activities. For them, peace was almost synonymous with the ingredients that make up a happy, secure childhood. In a nutshell, 'peace is everyday fun'.

Between them, our diverse museum entries help us rethink the connections we often make between peace and nature, peace and love, peace and justice, and peace and women, and peace and security, among many other pairings. The result is a smorgasbord of different concepts, intellectual framings and imaginaries – local, regional and transnational. Individually, all exhibits transcend the tropes, clichés and symbols traditionally associated with peace; and together, as they interact and temper each other, they challenge dominant concepts, dismantle long-standing frameworks and push us to consider visualisations of peace and mechanisms of peace-building that are often overlooked. The structure of the museum encourages visitors to explore open-mindedly, without a sense of trajectory or hierarchy; and through a mix of deliberate cross-references (via tags and hyperlinks) and accidental juxtapositions, the mosaic becomes a kaleidoscope, with new contrasts and connections coming into focus every time you take another look. As a result, each visit to the museum represents an ongoing process of critical discovery of possibly endless conceptualisations. They are not to be taken didactically; they merely offer an opening to further interrogation and understanding. We do not wish this project to be seen as the be-all and end-all of how one should or could visualize peace. Rather, it is a metaphorical call to (lay down) arms in a collaborative, open-ended exploration of prevailing habits and alternative ways of picturing, framing, evoking and engendering peace, through many lenses.

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