

Designing Change The Creativity for Peace Quilt

BY LAURA MARCUS GREEN

On a warm July day in 2014, a group of young women gathered in the Museum of International Folk Art's outdoor classroom. Some leaned intently over their work, channeling their feelings about home and belonging into designs drawn in wax on fabric squares. Others visited, compared their pieces, and hovered around a vat to watch as their instructor immersed the muslin blocks in a dye bath, bringing their designs to life in striking indigo and white contrast. Conversations in Arabic, Hebrew, and English intermingled on this bright morning. The setting was an indigo batik workshop led by Nigerian-Yoruba artist Gasali Adeyemo for participants in the 2014 Creativity for Peace camp, in collaboration with the Museum of International Folk Art's Gallery of Conscience. The workshop was held in conjunction with the Gallery of Conscience exhibit *Between Two Worlds: Folk Artists Reflect on the Immigrant Experience*, currently on display through January 17, 2016.

Established in 2010, the Gallery of Conscience serves as an agent of positive social change by engaging and connecting individuals and communities around social justice and human rights issues, using the power of folk arts to address historical and current events; to catalyze dialogue; and to promote personal reflection, communication, and action. Since 2012 the Gallery of Conscience (GoC) has operated through a "prototyping" process, in which exhibits evolve over time in response to visitor input and community engagement, ever a work in process.

Between Two Worlds opened in early 2014 as a "first draft," or exhibit iteration. The initial installation presented a core of artworks from MOIFA's collection, pieces purchased at the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market (with which the GoC has had a relationship from its inception), and others loaned by traditional artists from around the country. Over the ensuing year and beyond, the exhibit has grown to include local artwork that has come in largely through the GoC's community engagement process. Community engagement in the GoC takes several forms, including ongoing outreach and partnerships with local traditional artists and organizations whose work resonates with exhibit themes; consultation

with the GoC Community Advisory Committee, composed of refugee and immigrant traditional artists, service providers, and community members; and the GoC's community dialogue series, held in tandem with the National Dialogues on Immigration program of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, of which the GoC is a member.

Recognizing kindred passions for art, dialogue, social justice, and the issues addressed in *Between Two Worlds*, the GoC developed a collaboration with Gasali Adeyemo and the Santa Fe-based organization Creativity for Peace. Among its activities, Creativity for Peace holds an annual camp that brings Palestinian and Israeli young women to the Santa Fe area for three weeks of dialogue and art making "to start preparing them as leaders who can pave the way for peace in their communities and across borders with compassion, courage, and an understanding of the story of the other." In recent years, local young women have joined the campers for some activities, including Gasali Adeyemo's indigo batik workshop.

The workshop began with an orientation to *Between Two Worlds*, as participants explored the exhibit and its core themes—the struggle to belong in a place where you may or may not feel welcome, and the experience of living between worlds. These themes are embodied in the works on display, including textiles, wood carvings, beadwork, paintings, and poetry by Cuban, Mozambican, Hmong, Mexican, Hispanic New Mexican, Brazilian, Lakota, Polish, Navajo, Tibetan, Nigerian, and Peruvian artists. Drawing upon their cultural traditions, these artists address immigration from the perspective of those leaving home by choice or necessity, those who are left behind, and those who welcome newcomers into their communities. Throughout the gallery, interactive displays encourage visitors to contribute to the exhibit with prompts: "Write the story of your family's immigration journey"; "Come up with your own immigration poem"; "Describe a time when you felt that you didn't belong"; "Put a dot on the map where your family is from"; or, "If you had to leave your home, and could only bring what you could carry, what would it be? What would be hardest to leave behind?" The artwork and interactives invite visitors to



Gasali Adeyemo, left, works with Creativity for Peace participants at a workshop at the Museum of International Folk Art in conjunction with the Gallery of Conscience exhibit, *Between Two Worlds: Folk Artists Reflect on the Immigrant Experience*. Clockwise, starting at top left, are Israeli, Palestinian, and New Mexican workshop participants with their indigo batik quilt blocks: **Shir, Jessica, Duaa, Carmel, Castille, Ulah**.

consider exhibit themes from their own experience and from that of others and to contribute their responses, which then become part of the exhibition.

Gasali Adeyemo is among the featured exhibit artists. Having lived in Santa Fe since 1996, he travels home annually to visit family in Nigeria. The piece on display during the Creativity for Peace workshop, *Iba Dan Dun*, or *My Home Is Very Sweet*, illustrates the *Between Two Worlds* themes of home and belonging, and living between worlds. As Adeyemo observes, “How can you balance that—to have one foot in America and one foot in Africa?” The indigo and resist-dye techniques he learned in his native Nigeria are one means of achieving this balance.

Adeyemo learned to work with indigo from his family and then attended the Nike Center for Arts and Culture in Osogbo, Nigeria, for six years. During that time, he mastered the arts of batik painting on fabric, indigo dyeing, quilt making, embroidery, appliqué, and batik painting on rice paper, and then taught these art forms to others. He often says that “indigo is the color of love” in his culture; beyond its use as a fabric dye, it is valued for its medicinal and cleansing properties. The traditional symbols Adeyemo uses in his artwork and the way they are combined form a “language” of recognizable visual forms, transmitting messages about Yoruba cultural knowledge

and values. In Nigeria, these designs appear on cloth, and are painted on the sides of cars and taxis.

Following the introduction to *Between Two Worlds* and Adeyemo’s indigo and resist-dye tradition, workshop participants were encouraged to reflect on their own experiences of home, belonging and living between worlds, and to express their ideas through the medium of batik—which most were trying for the first time. The 2014 Creativity for Peace camp coincided with the outbreak of war between Israel and Gaza, rendering *Between Two Worlds* themes all the more compelling for workshop participants.

The workshop resulted in the Creativity for Peace Quilt, stitched from blocks made by the twenty-eight Israeli, Palestinian, and Santa Fean workshop participants. The quilt’s backing is an *adire* piece—indigo and cassava paste resist-dyed cloth—by Adeyemo. The title of this piece is *Four Friends*: the theme is unity. “If we all work together,” said Adeyemo, “we can make things happen. If you see four friends who go out together all the time, it’s very hard for other people to break them apart because they are all one. It’s a message to the community that if we band together we can change the world.”

Made from a patchwork of perspectives on a common goal, the young women’s quilt blocks manifest this type of unity.



Blocks by participants from different cultures were intermingled and sewn directly together, without sashing, to symbolize a world without borders. Some of the block designs speak for themselves. A Palestinian young woman, far from home for the first time, depicted a house aglow with the lights of a traditional wedding. An Israeli portrayed the Jewish Friday-night Shabbat (Sabbath) dinner, when her family gathers for stories and prayer. A Santa Fean shows that home is where you feel most comfortable, although some people may not know where their home is.

Other designs are more abstract, and invite interpretation. Ulah (last names of the campers are omitted to preserve their

Creativity for Peace Quilt, 2015. Indigo batik blocks created by Creativity for Peace participants during a workshop led by Gasali Adeyemo, in conjunction with *Between Two Worlds: Folk Artists Reflect on the Immigrant Experience*, at the Museum of International Folk Art. Photograph by Blair Clark.

privacy) is a Palestinian living in Israel. She loves math, so she created a geometry of war and peace, using triangles, one of her favorite shapes. She explained, “It looks like unity that got separated here, like a time where they [Arabs and Jews] were separated. Then they united and then they separated again. I think that it reflects the history of my land, when Palestinians used to live in peace with Jewish, before [19]48.” Pointing out the two larger triangles at the bottom of the design, she said, “This is Jewish maybe, [and] this is Palestinians, the majority of the citizens, and they lived in peace here.” A rainbow bridge connecting the large triangles represents “the peaceful time, where everything was okay, when people lived in peace.” The smaller, fragmented triangles that float above portray “what happened in [19]48, [after] the Nakba. . . This is now.”

Nakba, an Arabic word meaning “catastrophe,” refers specifically to the exodus of over 700,000 Palestinians from their homelands in 1948, during the first Arab-Israeli War, when the State of Israel was created. More generally, it is the period of war from 1947 to 1949. These events are alternately known by Jewish Israelis as Israeli Independence. Such linguistic distinctions mirror the difference in perspectives that accompany participants to the Creativity for Peace camp. Frances Salles, Creativity for Peace director of operations explained, “The same event can be seen two different ways, depending on where you are standing.” Bridging these differences is a focus of the dialogues and art making activities in which Creativity for Peace campers engage while in New Mexico, as they hear each other’s stories and learn of experiences and viewpoints different from their own.

Shir, a Jewish Israeli, described the symbolism in her block:

*I started out trying to flow with what’s coming to my mind.
I drew in the corner this round circle with the dot inside.
And it’s radiating out something very positive and round
and loving. . . And then I started just going around to draw
all these little squiggles. They kind of look like manta rays.
I really love ocean animals. It’s showing all the things on
earth. And then it starts coming down to the teardrops,*

and that symbolizes all the crying that's going on now, during the war, and all the years past. And the arrows and very strict lines of violence. And the sun is sort of in the middle of the piece, and it's the center of everything. It brings out light, even in the midst of the sadness in battle. And over here, you see this line with lines coming out of it? Well, in Israel, for one of our symbols we have a dove carrying an olive branch with leaves. So, I tried drawing olive leaves. And over here, this is like a road—and paths and ladders. And in the beginning, we said there's the round piece with the radiating love and kindness and positive things. On the other side, there's the same shape but it has straight lines and it's radiating negativity. So it's just the same, but different. The roads and ladders mean all the paths we take in life and the choices we make and the long way that we came, all the sixteen girls of Creativity for Peace, and the road that we're making for ourselves for the future.

These are but a few of the stories in the Creativity for Peace Quilt. A book accompanying the quilt in the Gallery of Conscience contains many others. Born well after the pivotal historical moments that first wrenched their people apart, the Creativity for Peace campers experience living between worlds every day. Yet several of them shared stories they heard from their grandparents about a time when Arabs and Jews lived side by side as neighbors. Perhaps their awareness of a more harmonious coexistence in the past inspires the campers to work towards mutual understanding and peace in their own time. The multiplicity of designs and perspectives in the quilt conveys the shared calling of the Gallery of Conscience, Creativity for Peace, and Gasali Adeyemo to use art as a forum for self-expression and dialogue about the issues that move us. ■

Based in Santa Fe, **Laura Marcus Green**, PhD, is an independent folklorist, writer, and consultant, specializing in cultural arts and heritage fieldwork and community-based projects. She is the community engagement coordinator for the Museum of International Folk Art's Gallery of Conscience and currently contributes fieldwork and essays to the Louisiana Division of the Arts Folklife Program's Baton Rouge Folklife Survey project. She is founding codirector of Building Cultural Bridges, a national interdisciplinary initiative encouraging support for refugee and immigrant arts and heritage through publications, presentations, and workshops. Her doctoral research focused on Navajo trading and traditional arts as a cultural meeting place.

Gallery of Conscience Events This Summer at the Museum of International Folk Art

Between Two Worlds: Folk Artists Reflect on the Immigrant Experience is on display at the Museum of International Folk Art through January 17, 2016. The final iteration of this evolving exhibition opens in conjunction with International Folk Arts Week with public programs on July 5 and 7. Visit internationalfolkart.org for program details.

Sunday, July 5, 1–4 pm Celebrate the reopening of *Between Two Worlds*. Explore new artworks, poetry, and interviews with international and local folk artists, resulting from a year-long collaboration with community partners and master folk artists. Sample delicacies from immigrant chefs and hear artists speak about living between two worlds. By museum admission. New Mexico residents free on Sunday.

Tuesday, July 7, 1–4 pm Join members of the Gallery of Conscience team for an afternoon of demonstrations by featured *Between Two Worlds* traditional artists, art making, and exploration of the Gallery of Conscience through guided activities. By museum admission.

The Gallery of Conscience at the Museum of International Folk Art gratefully acknowledges the following funders for their support: the National Endowment for the Arts, Mark Naylor and Dale Gunn, the International Folk Art Alliance, the International Folk Art Foundation, the Museum of New Mexico Foundation, and the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience. Much appreciation also goes to Creativity for Peace and to Gasali Adeyemo for their partnership and contributions to the collaboration, and to Creativity for Peace volunteer Bonnie Wilner for her work designing, piecing, facilitating the construction, and binding the Creativity for Peace Quilt.

Below: Mozambique artist Camurdino Mustafá Jethá holding his sculpture *Refugiados (Refugees)*, 2013, now in the collection of the Museum of International Folk Art (A.2013.61.2). Photograph by Laura Marcus Green.

