



Stamps of Hope: History and Purpose

Stamps of Hope is a traveling exhibit showcasing artwork by Syrian refugees living at the Zaa'tari refugee camp in Jordan. The exhibit was launched in October 2019 from Lincoln Land Community College in Springfield, Illinois by Rihab Sawah, Professor of Physics. Sawah, who brought the artwork from Jordan, says the paintings and drawings capture the hopes and dreams of those displaced by the Syrian war that began in 2011. Some of the artists used pieces of canvas cut from UNHCR tent fabric for their work, while others used materials such as newspapers and cardboard. When the UN Commission and International Relief and Development Organization noticed the art, they began to bring materials and supplies to the artists.

Many of the artists featured in the exhibit came together to create art initiatives, called Circle of Jasmine (Tawq Al Yasmeen), for children and adults living in the Zaa'tari Refugee Camp in Jordan. The artists regularly organize art workshops for children in the refugee camps. Such workshops offer the children a platform to express their ideas, sentiments, and give them hope for a brighter future they paint with their own hands and hearts. These artists have created a place for children to share their emotions, and to come together as a community and learn they are not alone. The children's workshops are a place for encouraging creativity and healing war wounds, and are funded by the artists themselves from the sale of their artwork.

Many of the paintings in the exhibit portray faces. The images of faces is what draws people in to view the art. When people live in a refugee camp, they live within very close proximity to one another. Faces are everywhere around the instant someone steps outside of their living space. They can see the children sitting or playing in front of the tents. A child who's been displaced from home has lost a part of themselves and that shows in their eyes. Picture the painting of a little girl who had to flee her home and left her pet bird behind. Sawah says "The pet is a piece of herself she left behind. It represents a part she was very passionate about that is no longer accessible to her. This is portrayed intricately in her eyes. When you contemplate these images of faces, you can't help but feel as if you are standing in front of the real human being, drawn to come closer."



Some of the artists are trained and studied art at the university in Syria. Others are professionals who studied other disciplines and had different careers before the war. One is an economist, but he's also an artist. Another studied media and Arabic literature. They come from different walks of life and from different cities and towns. This includes the commercial city of Aleppo in the far north, Homs in the central western side, the capital Damascus and Dara'a in the south just across the border from Jordan. They represent a collage of people with different experiences who came together with a new shared vision through art. They see art as a messenger and its message is peace. One artist said: "You cannot sit in front of a canvas and paint anything unless you have made peace with some parts of yourself that allow you to even sit, and be composed enough, to lift the brush and paint." They have a vision of a future that includes new hopes and dreams for their children.

Sawah shares that she invites viewers "not just to see the exhibit with their eyes but to experience it with their hearts. There is something in this art that will touch and transform parts of the viewer. The art deeply evokes a sense of how much we share in our humanity, across the world, that is far greater and more significant than our differences."

The exhibit will resume traveling in the post COVID-19 era in 2022.