

## Middle Eastern artists call for peace

Local collection gathers paintings from the Mideast region.

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Lebanese artist Anita Toutikian curated a York exhibition of works by four Middle Eastern artists, each of whom painted a scene of peace in the region. She stands before her painting, 'New Horizon,' during a reception in York last week. (YDR - BIL BOWDEN)



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Four Middle Eastern artists from four faith traditions contributed to a new art collection in the lobby of a York office building.

The artists painted their vision of peace, which has eluded the Mideast region for decades. The final painting arrived in York last month from Jordan.

The permanent collection -- on display now in the foyer of 15 N. Cherry Lane in York -- was the brainchild of York architect Richard Bono, who designed the lobby space and started working on the exhibit five years ago.

In the Middle East, the subject of peace is a sensitive issue, she said last week during a visit to York. In a place where conflict is constant and politics volatile, peace means something different to everyone -- especially when Americans are involved.

"At first, I was a bit hesitant because I didn't know what peace means to him," Toutikian said of Bono. "I had to have long conversations with him to be convinced that this was a true peace project and not just propaganda."

Toutikian, an Armenian Christian, hit similar resistance when she broached other Middle Eastern artists with the idea.

"Their worries were how would their work be interpreted," she said. "They had to prove to themselves that they are doing something good and



Lebanese artist Anita Toutikian, an Armenian Christian, painted 'New Horizon,' which shows a man and a woman picking olives in a field of olive trees. (YDR - BIL BOWDEN)

really for peace. They wanted to feel good about it."

Slowly, they committed to the project. But it took years for the works to be completed.

Sometimes, months passed when Toutikian heard nothing from the artists -- a Palestinian named Raed Ibrahim and a Druze named Jamil Molaeb (the Druze faith began as an offshoot of Islam). She wondered if they'd changed their minds, she said.

"Part of this project was having the patience to wait," Bono said.

The greatest disruption came in July 2006 during a 34-day military conflict in Lebanon and northern Israel. Beirut's international airport was bombed the day Toutikian had shipped Molaeb's painting.

"We didn't know if it left on the plane before (the attack)," she said. (It had.)

Toutikian and Ibrahim fled the country until the violence died down, she said.

"There's so much contradiction and disagreement there," Toutikian said. "It's better than it was 10 years ago. There's always hope that it will be this year, or next year for peace."

In the lobby, an old doorway from a Lutheran church frames her painting. She chose to illustrate a man and woman harvesting olives in a field of olive trees.

"It is a contrast to what is happening. No soldiers, no bombing, no barricades. No walls. Nothing. Sky and the sea and beautiful fields and people working in the fields," she said.

"It does not exist. Some day . . ."

## Art by Toutikian

The American University Museum's Katzen Arts Center is exhibiting work by Lebanese artist Anita Toutikian, "Convergence: New Art from Lebanon," through May 16.

Gallery hours are 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesdays through Sundays. For details, visit [www.american.edu/cas/museum](http://www.american.edu/cas/museum) or call 202-885-1300