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Infusing a Grim Subject with Color and Whimsy

IN 2011, M. TERESA RODRIGUEZ, the director of the George Segal Gallery on the Montclair State University campus, received a call from the Holocaust Resource Center of the Jewish Federation of Greater Clifton-Passaic.

The message, Ms. Rodriguez recalled recently in a phone interview, was, “We need your help.” The building housing the federation was being sold, and a new home was needed for paintings and murals by Israel Bernbaum, a Holocaust survivor born in Warsaw, who donated them to the center upon his death in 1993.

Mark Levenson, immediate past president of the federation and president-elect of the New Jersey State Association of Jewish Federations, explained the decision to offer the art to the university. “We wanted it to be housed in an educational institution, to serve educational purposes, and we wanted it to be out there in as public a place as possible. Montclair State fit all our criteria,” he said.

Now, to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, the gallery will put on display a freshly restored cache of Mr. Bernbaum’s paintings and murals.

The show, “Israel Bernbaum Painting His Story,” which opens on Tuesday, includes six murals and 20 paintings completed from 1981 to 1992.

All the murals depict scenes from the Warsaw uprising, and most of the paintings are Holocaust-related, Ms. Rodriguez said. Despite the grim subject matter, the colorful, whimsical works are suited to, and originally intended for, children as young as 6, she said. Mr. Bernbaum was also known as a writer and illustrator of children’s books.

The yearlong restoration process enabled the gallery to open the show in time to recognize the anniversary of the uprising, which took place from April 19 to May 16, 1943. The exhibition will coincide with a series of film screenings and lectures at the university, including two by the guest curator, Batya Brutin, director of Holocaust Studies and the Israeli Society Program at Beit Berl College in Israel. The exhibition closes April 21.

Reached by phone in Israel, Dr. Brutin said she leapt at the invitation to work on the show, not only because it afforded a chance to be involved with the unveiling of the newly restored work, but also because of the aesthetics of Mr. Bernbaum’s art and its place in Holocaust history.

“A lot of people discover Bernbaum through his books,” Dr. Brutin said. They include the 1993 title “I Am a Star: Child of the Holocaust,” illustrated by Mr. Bernbaum and written by Inge Auerbacher, who will give a talk at Montclair State on March 1. “But the murals and paintings themselves are tremendously beautiful, and moving,” Dr. Brutin added. “The artistic value can’t be overstated. No one before him focused on this subject with his kind of vision.”

“Israel Bernbaum Painting His Story” runs Feb. 26 through April 21 at the George Segal Gallery on the Montclair State University campus, 1 Normal Avenue, Montclair; montclair.edu or (973) 655-3382.

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