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Montclair State marks Shoa Milestone

Art exhibit being seen as an effort to raise school's Jewish profile

An exhibit of artworks by a Warsaw-born survivor will be the centerpiece of a semester-long, multi-disciplinary examination of the Holocaust at Montclair State University.

While other public and private universities in the state are known for their extensive Holocaust and Judaism departments or programming, the exhibit, "Israel Bernbaum: Painting His Story," marks perhaps MSU's largest move in that direction.

It also serves as a marker, for many at the university, of the distance the university has traveled from its recent past, flecked with incidents on campus that drew charges of anti-Semitism or anti-Zionism.

"I've been here 23 years, and I've never, ever seen anything like this," said Ron Hollander, associate professor of English and director of the Jewish American Studies minor at MSU.

Hollander was instrumental in bringing to campus the work of Bernbaum, who lived in Queens before his death in 1993. Hollander's long, scholarly connection with the Holocaust Resource Center of the Jewish Federation of Greater Clifton-Passaic led, in September 2011, when the center closed, to a donation of about 3,000 pieces of Bernbaum's work to MSU.

The collection includes murals and drawings, as well as original copies of Bernbaum's correspondences with political figures and other historic and personal artifacts.

For Hollander, the exhibit has several goals: to memorialize the victims of the Holocaust and other genocides and to say to survivors that they are not forgotten.

A third goal, he said, is raising the profile of MSU in the local Jewish community.

"Montclair State University is in the center of a vast, active, informed, educated Jewish community," said Hollander. "For too long that community has not been developed to its fullest potential here. At last, we are finally doing something that will bring in more Jewish students, especially if we get more Jewish support and development funds."

The exhibit, marking the 70th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, will be displayed at the university's George Segal Gallery from Feb. 26 through April 21.

In conjunction with the exhibit, a series of lectures, events, and competitions will be offered at the university.

The idea for the exhibit came from Segal Gallery director M. Teresa Rodriguez. “I saw in a newspaper article that the 70th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising was coming up, and I said, we have the material here — let’s see if we can build support for a show,” she recalled.

The essential question, said Hollander, was: “How do we use the art as a springboard to teach? It’s not enough to throw up multiple paintings. After all, we are not the Montclair Art Museum.”

The exhibit was expanded to include films, lectures, and a student competition for scholarly work relating to the Holocaust, with a first prize of \$100 to be awarded in April.

Undervalued work

Israel Bernbaum escaped Warsaw before the ghetto was completed, and immigrated to the United States in 1957. He studied painting at Queens College, and his work focused on daily life in Poland and the rise of the Nazi menace. Between 1981 and 1992, he created a series of murals that depict the destruction of the ghetto, based on historical records, eyewitness accounts, and photographs taken by the Nazis.

He intended his work to educate children about Jewish suffering, and a book of his paintings published by Putnam, *My Brother’s Keeper: The Holocaust Through the Eyes of an Artist*, was translated into German and won the 1990 German Prize for Children’s Literature. Children’s author Inge Auerbacher also used his illustrations in her award-winning *I Am a Star: Child of the Holocaust*.

Rodriguez said Bernbaum’s work has been under-presented and undervalued.

“It’s more than documentary work for children,” Rodriguez said. “But I needed an art historian knowledgeable about the Holocaust who could reinterpret the material as fine art.”

She hired guest curator Dr. Batya Brutin, director of Holocaust studies and the Israeli Society Program at Beit Berl College, Israel, who wrote an essay reflecting the ways in which some of Bernbaum’s pieces interweave historical fact with artistic license.

“It’s difficult for an artist to convey this serious, violent story” said Rodriguez. “That is part of why this works aesthetically. With his naive, almost cartoon-like style, Bernbaum’s remarkable ability to intersperse symbolism with graphic images makes the presentation of unfathomable and horrific themes accessible and palpable.”

The exhibit and accompanying series is sponsored by the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, John McMullen Family Foundation, proceeds from the George Segal Gallery Art Connections 8, Teddi and Scott Dolph, and the Holocaust Council of Greater MetroWest.

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