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The Golem in Art: an Interview with Beverly Brodsky, Creator of her own Golem

Marcia W. Posner

Beverly Brodsky, whose most recent book is *Here Come the Purim Players* (Lothrop, 1984) is an artist who is constantly searching from within to find various art forms to express her view of the world.

Her work has evolved from bold geometricity to a more painterly, intuitive approach. She uses a wide variety of watercolor techniques and colors that range from the subtle transparent glazes to a bright, more opaque palette. Ms. Brodsky says she is a "color expressivist." She refers to color in her paintings as a primary tool with which she creates her images. Her pigments must be light saturated. She is aware that color has psychological impact on the viewer. By manipulating the colors, the viewer is emotionally stimulated in a variety of ways throughout the picture book as the story progresses from page to page. The colors are an essential part of her story-telling device.

Her art, while clearly recognizable as Brodsky, changes according to its subject. *Secret Places* (Lippincott 1979), an earlier book, clearly expresses her fluid, dreamy images of childhood with rich pastel tones. In *Gooseberries to Oranges* and *Here Come The Purim Players* the equally rich colors are now superimposed and defined with layers of cross-hatching which have literally been etched into the paper. Here, texture as well as line and color become an important element. Because of the nature of Barbara Cohen's text for *Here Come the Purim Players*, Ms. Brodsky had to invent a completely new format. She had to alternate between three distinct environments: The shtetl, the Persian palace and Reb Zalman's living room. Accordingly, the colors and style shift from the muted earth tones, to vivid decorative oriental patterns, to bright warm hues of candlelight. The complexity of the play within the story posed a challenge which she feels she resolved successfully. "I feel as though I choreographed my paintings," she says.

In *The Golem*, Brodsky has contrasted broad areas of deep, harmonious earthtones, with dramatic and explosive complementary colors. The stark white of the page is used almost as a color in itself. "It's a device to give form and shape to the content," she says. This important device was used in *Sedna* (Viking, 1975) and *Jonah* (Lippincott, 1977) as well. (See cover photo - Ed.)

This interview with the artist/author took place in her Manhattan studio on September 21, 1984.

On the Golem Theme

Q. What decided you to select *The Golem* as a theme for a picture book?

A. Once, in the South of France, I happened to watch a German expressionist film, "Der Golem," on television, and the images on the screen haunted me. I began to do research on the Golem. I read books about it; studied the period in detail—the life of the Jews in Prague at that time, their clothing, folkways, religious beliefs . . . I received slides of the Alt-Neu Synagogue, the Prague Ghetto, and the cemetery and its gravestones, including Rabbi Loewe's gravesite. I started researching fifteenth-century engravings of rabbis, ancient stone carvings, seder scenes, and Hebrew illuminated manuscripts.

Q. Did you visit Prague?

A. I never visited, but in my imagination and through my research, I was indeed transported there, dreaming of Czechoslovakia at night.

Q. Why do you think the Golem becomes destructive?

A. I read many Golem stories and interpretations. The one I chose to write about and illustrate is, for me, the most powerful, evocative, and dramatic story — full of expression and meaning. It is also universal. I was struck by the idea that we really don't have control over our creations. Once they are created, these things have a life of their own . . . The Golem was intended to protect and not to destroy, but even though our intentions are the best and even though the rabbi produced this force for peaceful purposes, it then has a life of its own and the rabbi no longer had control of it. As human beings, we cannot predict the future. There is no absolute blueprint.

Q. But why wasn't the Golem benign?

A. In other stories there are more benign Golemim who act differently and are created for different purposes. It was used as a servant, primarily on the High Holy holidays and on the Sabbath when Jews could not work. The Golem would do the chores. It



Beverly Brodsky at work on the Golem in her studio.

would, for example, fetch water, light the hearth fires, chop wood or keep watch over the ghetto and guard against trouble, especially any Blood Libel. This occurred, frequently, particularly during Passover as an excuse for pogroms. This is a very sad part of history.

There is another important point to remember. The golem is a thing that has no soul. It is imperfect, mindless, and mute. It is a machine — an automaton. Machines collapse and they do unexpected things. Symbolically, I feel, the Golem represents both good and evil aspects that exist in the world. It has, as I mentioned earlier, the ability to achieve good and the possibility of becoming a destructive force. In society and within one, there is the choice between the two, for they co-exist. It is because there is this choice that there is freedom. To be free means to be responsible - not only for ourselves, but for each other as well, and that's where the difficulty lies. How do we do that and do it well!?

On the Creative Process

Q. *To what extent is art as natural to the artist as writing, so that it flows effortlessly from brush to paper, and how much is drudgery and hard work?*

A. It's all hard work. Sometimes it's exciting. Sometimes it's boring. Both are a part of the creative process. This is something I accept. As I do research, I work on hundreds of thumbnail sketches — pictograms (ideographs), trying to follow the logic of the text. I save the little drawings. I throw nothing away. I allow my unconscious to flow and I internalize the images. Then I begin to work on the structure of the pictures with these notes at hand. The structure would include the formal elements, such as, texture, color, form, page design, and composition of every painting. I do all of this while researching material and perhaps rewriting or polishing the text. Preparing for *The Golem*, I looked carefully at ancient stone carvings, trying to understand and incorporate their stylization. I also think about a central motif or motifs that should tie all 32 pictures together. I thought about the many variations of God's name, as they were central to the Kabbalistic creation of the Golem by the Baal Shem Tov (Master of God's Name or the "good" name). I used certain Hebrew letters throughout the book. For example, I used Shin (Fire), the Aleph (air, spirit, the Godhead), and the Mem (water). These are the three elements. The fourth is earth, which is the

Golem. The Mem is a letter that also means fish, God's mute creation. This letter appears on the Golem's forehead because the Golem is also mute. It is a pun — there are many throughout the book. These essential letters also appear as a design element for the frontispiece of my book. They are etched into the paper to look like stone carvings or engravings. When read together they represent Shem or Shema - prayer. All these letters have numerical power. All Hebrew letters have specific quantity. This is something I became aware of as I did my research. To conclude, wherever a writer uses punctuation for structure, an artist can use symbols or other graphic patterns or designs. I absorbed the archway as part of my format because Prague has many archways. It was a way of transporting myself and the reader to this mystical place. I created this form mainly to illuminate the text and to emphasize the light of the moon or the spiritual light of God, symbolized by the menorah, (representing the seven days of creation).

Q. *Which do you think of first—the text or the illustrations?*

A. I always think of the total composition of the storybook—pictures with text—and the pages that follow. You have to be concise. You have to put across your ideas within a certain number of pages. You must simplify text without conveying simplistic ideas. Children understand deep meaning. I have to have reasons for placing things, for doing them. Everything has a purpose. The pictures must follow the order of the words and their meaning. Both have to work together as a unity. It has to make sense when each page is turned.

Q. You said that you think of the whole book—images and words. Could you explain that further, please?

A. I think of each book as a play that happens on paper, and I am the director of the play. Therefore, I have to dress up my characters in costumes, give them ideas, phrases to speak, and create a setting for them, props . . . I do have a theatrical point of view. As a child I was taken to plays and films. I have always had a passion for dance and opera. My mother was an opera buff and I would accompany her, reading the libretto which she would translate. My father would read to me every night from Grimm's, Anderson's Fairy Tales, and Aesop's fables.

Then I use a 'storyboard technique'—this is like the frames of a film or thumbnail sketches to develop a book format. I often create a mock-up of a book in order to see if the text and the pictures are working together.

Q. When do you actually start to draw the illustrations that will become the book?

A. I do this only after the text is typeset and after I complete the mock-up (full size). At this point the characters, the setting, the design and format are all developed. I make layouts on tracing paper and then rubbings from the tracing paper on to the watercolor paper. If it is not a perfect execution when I'm finished (it might take several days), I throw it away and start over.

Q. You start to paint. Do you get nervous when you sit down to the final work?

A. I remember an all-night session when the painting wasn't working out. The scale had been all wrong. If even one of the elements (of art) is wrong, it won't come. Sometimes when a painting is worked on too much the colors are wrong; they're not spontaneous.

This happened the night before my deadline, which I myself imposed. Anyway, I destroyed the one I had worked on for a couple of days and started over. I finished work at 5:00 a.m. It was the one where the Golem . . . "hurled enormous rocks." I was very pleased with it, afterwards.

Q. Do you ever listen to music when you paint?

A. Oh yes! I listen to Bach, Vivaldi, Mozart and ethnic music of all kinds. It makes the unconscious flow. I did study music for thirteen years. It is part of what I am. I think it helps my rhythm, sense of flow and pacing. There is a connection between music and art.

Q. Do you have a definition of artistic creativity? Must it be an original idea?

A. It has already been said that there is nothing new under the sun! Themes throughout history in art and literature have been used over and over again. What becomes new is the transformation of a theme. Then you have an original idea. Art is a conscious effort to externalize, transform, or modify this content of a theme. That's where the artistry comes in to play. For example, if you have a piece of clay in your hand that is shaped into a sphere (the sphere would be the theme) and you place your finger inside to create a hole in it, you have already modified the form, somewhat. It is no longer just a sphere. Then, if you consider making another concavity and you wonder and doubt if you should do so, you make a decision, a conscious effort, which then changes the content. You have transformed this piece of clay, making it the medium for your expression. Further, if all the elements work, if they are harmonious, unified, this then becomes Art. This is the creative process.

On Being Jewish

Q. Does your being Jewish have anything to do with your work?

A. I have an emotional and spiritual connection to Jewish history and stories. My parents were immigrants. They came from Eastern Europe. My mother was from the Austro-Hungarian Empire; my father from Russia. We weren't Orthodox Jews, but we celebrated the High Holidays, lit candles and observed the Sabbath. Once, on Yom Kippur, when I went to the Orthodox synagogue in our neighborhood, my mother explained that I would have to sit in the women's section, upstairs behind the curtains. I felt strange, like an outsider. I wanted to be where the men were chanting and praying — where the excitement was and where the light was! So I decided to remain outside where I knew God could see me better. I didn't want to remain hidden. I know that I absorbed the cadences and intonations of the household's secret language, Yiddish. I picked up the music and emotion of the language.

Q. Which, of all the books you have written, is your favorite?

A. It's hard to say — it's like saying which of your children is your favorite. They are all special in a different way. *Secret Places* is about my childhood. *Gooseberries to Oranges* (Lothrop, 1982) was about my mother's experience in coming to America. It was so close to me that Barbara Cohen interviewed my mother and wrote the text. This was suggested by Dorothy Briley, the editor. One of my favorite books is out of print now, unfortunately. It is *Jonah* (Lippincott, 1977). It is about the universalism of God and about transformation and growth and responsibility—not just to yourself, but to others, as well. *Jonah* grew from boyhood to manhood in a very short time. I like the way I used the white spaces; also the terracotta and other biblical hues. *Here Come the Purim Players* was one of the most intricate books I have done. I vary my approach to fit each subject and in *Here Come the Purim Players* I had to 'switch gears' three times—as I mentioned before. *The Golem* is a book I am very proud of. It won a Caldecott Honor Award and a Notable Book Award. I also wrote and directed a filmstrip of the Golem for Weston Woods (*The Golem, A Jewish Legend*, Weston Woods, 1979), and in 1978 I collaborated on a multi-media dance/theatre production of "The Golem," presented by the Phoenix Dance Theatre (Second Annual Cambridge River Festival). The legend of the Golem is eternal, relevant to all times.

Beverly Brodsky is an artist, author, well-known lecturer, and teacher. She has taught at the Parsons School of Design and Adelphi University.

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