

New Art Museum Opens At Yad Vashem



"INFIRMARY FOR CHILDREN" by Karel Fleischmann

by Ralph Lister

This is definitely art for art's sake. No isms, no styles or schools. No well-known names. Often the artists risked their lives by recording the surroundings. If discovered, the price was death, but they were driven to draw, to paint to sculpt, so that the world would know.

Yad Vashem, Israel's extensive memorial to the Holocaust on Jerusalem's Mount Herzl, has recently opened an art museum to exhibit works produced by inmates of the concentration camps during World War II.

Yad Vashem - "a place and a name...an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off", Isaiah 56:5 - is visited by virtually every tourist to Israel. The impressive layout of the memorial complex and the permanent exhibit leave a lasting impression. The new art museum adds a poignant dimension. It converts the documentary and photographic evidence of the Holocaust into a stunning series of personal artistic testimony which leaves the visitor stunned and drained. At Theresienstadt, the Nazis "model" ghetto, Jewish artists were compelled to produce representations of the camps for propaganda purposes. This gave the artists access to paper and drawing instruments with which to produce their own testimony. "I still hear voices" remembers a painter who survived. "You will live. Paint us, so at least we'll live on paper."

Survival on paper was, for most of the artist-inmates, the only life granted them. For us, a glimpse into these years, reveals dormitories crowded with bunks, inmates in their striped uniforms; exhausted, emaciated. Yet, in spite of the despair and horror, here and there, a note of humor.

In addition to Theresienstadt, sections of the museum are devoted to art produced by inmates of

Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, Dachau, the Warsaw, Lodz and Vilna Ghettos, as well as dozens of smaller concentration and internment camps.

Since Yad Vashem was founded 30 years ago, the documents, objects, relics and bequests it has collected include over two thousand works of art, 300 of which are exhibited in the new museum. Curator Irit Salmon-Livne points out that this collection is without precedent considering the death sentence threatening the artists if discovered. After the war, some of the works were recovered by the artists themselves returning to the camps, or by others who by chance found work hidden in cans, behind walls, under floors. Some art appears on envelope backs, tiny scraps of paper - some on real canvas. Many of the artists who survived stopped creating after the war. Many who did not survive displayed exceptional talent, and would no doubt have found their niche as artists after the war.

A special area of the museum is devoted to art done by children in the camps. After the pervasive greyness of the adult works, here is an explosion of color; an optimistic world as only children could conceive it. This section of the museum is to many, the most poignant. A searing memorial to the 1.5 million Jewish children murdered by the Nazis.

Assistant curator Ilana Guri reports that most visitors to Yad Vashem find the art museum as impressive as the documentary exhibition. The museum has published a catalogue in Hebrew, English, French and German. The museum is open weekdays from 9 to 5, Friday from 9 to 1 and closed on Saturdays. Yad Vashem is easily reached by taxi or bus, ten minutes from downtown Jerusalem and is included in all inclusive tours to Israel.

Temple Israel AJE Program

Ms. Mary Alice Dixon Hinson will speak on "Art and Tradition" at Temple Israel on Feb. 19 at 8 p.m. Ms. Hinson is a faculty member of UNCC's Dept. of Architecture. This adult education program is open to the community at no charge.

Like its intellectual history, the art and architecture of the post-medieval West have been shaped by the romantic equation of creativity with invention. The cult of the new is so striking an aspect of Western culture that the continuous rejection of precedent in itself constitutes the normative tradition. The literary critic Octavio Paz uses the term "the tradition of discontinuity" to describe the paradox of this position. So deeply entrenched is this value structure that we often tend to accept as natural and self-evident two rather curious consequences of it.

These are, first, the devaluation of the imitation, and second, the marginality of the artist. Each of these will be surveyed by the speaker and then turn to an alternative tradition which our ethnocentric emphasis on the new had made conceptually unattractive and therefore largely invisible to Western eyes. That tradition not only does not share the Western premise of art as invention but is predicated on its inverse. That tradition is the Chinese! It has held, for some two thousand years, that in art, as in life, imitation is more meritorious than creation.



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Arrival Time: 1:00 P.M.

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This is a JWB presentation.



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