Visions of Israel: The Art and Illustrations of Chaim Gross
An Exhibit of the Museum of Jewish Civilization
In Celebration of the 65th Anniversary of the Creation of the State of Israel
Maurice Greenberg Center for Judaic Studies
University of Hartford

April 3 – September 13, 2013

Sponsored by the Hartzel Lebed Endowment Fund at the Maurice Greenberg Center for Judaic Studies
and the Renee and Chaim Gross Foundation, New York
The Museum of Jewish Civilization

The Museum of Jewish Civilization was founded in 2003 thanks to a generous gift by Dr. William Sherman of West Hartford and other donors. It was directed by Dr. Richard A. Freund (2003-2007) and is presently directed by Dr. Avinoam Patt of the Maurice Greenberg Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Hartford. The Guest Curator is DreAnna Hadash. The Museum is a teaching museum and its primary goal is to tell the story of Jewish civilization for the general and academic communities of Connecticut through exhibitions coordinated with lectures and coursework in the extensive Judaica offerings of the Greenberg Center.

The Museum of Jewish Civilization’s William Singer Gallery has featured exhibits highlighting the history of Jewish interactions with Muslims and Christians; the lives of the Jews in Germany, the United States, Latin America, and ancient Israel, as well as books on and about the Jewish people worldwide and the Holocaust. The Jewish Music section features the Cantorate, highlighting the way Jews used the Arts to express their spirit, while the section on archaeology chronicles the daily and religious life of Ancient Israel and now holds the Grae Collection of Jewish Art.

The Museum is located in Mortensen Library, Harry Jack Gray Center, University of Hartford, 200 Bloomfield Avenue, West Hartford, CT. For docent led tours and Museum hours, please call 860.768.5729 or email mgcjs@hartford.edu.

The Renee and Chaim Gross Foundation

Founded by American sculptor Chaim Gross (1904-91) and his wife Renee (d. 2005), the Foundation is located in the couple’s historic Greenwich Village townhouse and the artist’s studio space at 526 LaGuardia Place in New York City. The Foundation houses an extensive collection of Gross’s sculptures and drawings, a fascinating archive of letters, catalogues, clippings, and photographs, as well as Gross’s large personal collection of African, Oceanic, Pre-Columbian, American, and European art.

The Foundation’s mission is to encourage artists, students, and the community to actively engage with these artworks and archive and to learn about Gross, his contemporaries, and the history of American art. Through cultural activities such as collection-based exhibitions, lectures, and gallery talks, as well as print and digital publications along with its blog, the Foundation strives to make relevant to a contemporary audience our shared cultural history.


Unless otherwise noted, all works by Chaim Gross and from the Collection of the Renee and Chaim Gross Foundation, New York.
Born in Galicia, in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, c. 1904, Chaim Gross is considered one of the greatest twentieth-century figurative sculptors. In his wood engravings of circus performers, animals and the female form, Chaim Gross combined traditional, tribal and folk styles. In 1921 Gross emigrated to the United States, where he began studies with Robert Laurent and Elie Nadelman. After the events of World War II, Gross began to focus heavily on Jewish themes relating to his cultural heritage. His works can be seen in every major American museum collection and at the Renee and Chaim Gross Foundation in New York. *Visions of Israel: The Art and Illustrations of Chaim Gross* will be the first exhibition of its kind to examine the artist’s relationship with the State of Israel. Timed to coincide with the 65th anniversary of the creation of the State of Israel, the exhibit is at once a fitting tribute to an unexamined aspect of Gross’s art and an appropriate means to commemorate this significant milestone.

While Gross came from a Hasidic family which faithfully observed the Jewish holidays and traditions, he avoided Jewish themes in his work for the first twenty five years of his career. The destruction of European Jewry and the creation of the State of Israel led to a major shift in his art. He lost his brother, sister, brother-in-law, niece and nephew in the Holocaust. In addition to these deeply felt personal losses, the horrors of the war and the annihilation of centuries of Jewish tradition and culture motivated a change in his art. His renewed emotional involvement with Judaism was also reinforced by what he saw as the miracle of Israel, where he saw Hasidic Jews who reminded him of his early childhood in Austria, and observed diverse groups of Jews reuniting in the Jewish homeland from all over the world. Gross’s first visit to Israel was in 1949; he returned at least twenty times throughout his life.

*Visions of Israel* features three of Chaim Gross’s sketchbooks created during his visits to Israel, watercolors of scenes he observed during a 1951 trip (including paintings of Jerusalem, Safed, and Nazareth), lithographs created on behalf of the State to honor anniversaries of Israel’s creation, bronze sculptures related to Jewish themes, busts of Chaim and Vera Weizmann (first President of the State of Israel) and a lithium stone sculpture of *Naomi and Ruth* (based on the biblical story).
Chaim Gross, c. 1904-1991

Biography

Chaim Gross was born in the Galician village of Wolowa, into the family of Moses Gross, a lumber merchant, and his wife, Leah (Sperber), c. March 17, 1904. He had a traditional Jewish upbringing, learning Torah and Talmud with a tutor, before attending cheder in Kolomyia where his family had moved in 1912. During the First World War, his family experienced direct persecution, especially during the Russian occupation of Galicia, and Gross and his brother Avrom-Leib wandered through Stryj, Silesia, Vienna, and Budapest until the end of the war. Despite the displacement and wandering of the war years, Gross developed the habit of sketching constantly during the war, a habit he would continue until the end of his life. In 1919, once the war was over, Chaim Gross traveled to Vienna and then to Budapest, where he won a scholarship to an art school. He spent six months in 1919 and 1920 in Budapest, studying with Utz Bela, a post-impressionist painter, at an academy of art established under the short-lived regime of the radical Bela Kun. Gross later recalled visiting the Budapest Museum and seeing paintings by Marc Chagall, El Greco, and Pieter Breughel. Following the Romanian invasion of Hungary in 1920 and the subsequent fall of Bela Kun’s communist government, Chaim returned to Kolomyia with his brother, Avrom-Leib. However, with hostilities continuing between the newly created Polish republic and Russia, Chaim escaped and fled to Vienna where he spent a year studying life-drawing at the Kunstgewerbe Schule. On April 2, 1921, Chaim and Avrom-Leib sailed from Le Havre, France, on the steamship La Bourdonnais, arriving at Ellis Island, New York, on April 14, 1921 where they reunited with their older brother Naftoli who had reached New York in 1914.

Gross attended classes at the Educational Alliance Art School on East Broadway, where he met other young artists including Elias Newman, Phillip Evergood, Peter Blume, Barnett Newman, Adolph Gottlieb, Saul Baizerman, Concetta Scaravaglione, Isaac and Moses Soyer, and others who remained life-long friends. Biographer Roberta Tarbell notes that at this time, “his most important mentor was Elie Nadelman,” who taught him “abstraction of form, the beauty of the simple curved contour line, a love of folk art, and a belief in the human figure as the most important subject,” which would all become hallmarks of his carved sculptures. In 1926, Gross studied direct carving (taille directe) with Robert Laurent for two months, a technique of carving away stone or wood without the aid of a model or maquette in order to reveal the finished sculpture, which would become Gross’s defining style. Gross would become especially well-known for his carvings of acrobats and dancers. Like many other artists following the First World War, Gross was disillusioned by the brutality of
modern society and sought refuge in the amusements and fantasy of the circus and its performers.

*Girl on Wheel, 1940, Mahogany*  
*Mother and Child at Play, 1940, Bronze*

*Offspring Balancing, 1972, Bronze*  
Provincetown Art Association and Museum
Gross had his first one-man show in New York City at Gallery 144 in March 1932 and married Renee Nechin in December 1932. In the 1930s, Gross worked on a series of government commissions and achieved growing recognition for his work, winning fellowships and awards, including the silver medal at the Paris Exposition in 1937.

In 1941 the Metropolitan Museum of Art purchased *Girl on Wheel*, and, when Gross’s *Lillian Leitzel* was shown at the important “Artists for Victory” exhibition at that
museum in 1942, he was awarded the $3000 purchase prize. The Associated American Artists Gallery staged four one-man shows of Gross’s pictorial and sculptural works during the 1940s, attesting to his continuing productivity and artistic vigor.

From 1932-1952, Gross’s studio on East 9th Street became a meeting place for a wide cross-section of artists in New York. Chaim Gross taught sculpture for fifty-one consecutive years at the Educational Alliance and for thirty at the New School for Social Research, both in New York.

After 1938, Gross began to spend his summers in Provincetown on Cape Cod, where he became acquainted with many of the leading Abstract Expressionists. During the summers in Provincetown, Gross worked primarily on pictorial works and continued to sketch nearly every day.

![The Tourists, 1959, Bronze](image)

_Provincetown, MA_

By the late 1930s, Gross had already carved over 100 sculptures out of wood, but during the 1940s he began to work with stone, sculpting heads from Belgian black marble, as well
as figures and heads from serpentine stone, lithium stone, Mexican onyx, and semi-translucent white alabaster. In the 1950s, he began to cast his wood carvings in bronze, then transitioned to use plaster models for his bronze casts. During his trip to Europe in 1959, most of which was spent in Rome, Gross also visited Sicily, Holland (Amsterdam and Rotterdam), Israel, and Paris. While in Paris, he became enthusiastic about the pioneering role of the Paris school in early 20th century art and decided to create a series of sculptures in homage to such heroes of modern art as Picasso, Braque, Renoir, and Degas. He resolved to begin his series with his personal friend, Marc Chagall, and became so absorbed with Chagall that he never finished the rest of his series on the Paris school. Chagall and Gross shared origins in Eastern Europe (Chagall from Russia; Gross from Galicia in the Austro-Hungarian empire) as well as common Hasidic roots. And interestingly, like Chagall, Gross began to employ dreamlike imagery of traditional Jewish themes in his art, especially after the Second World War.

![Homage to Chagall (no. 2), 1961](image)

**Homage to Chagall (no. 2), 1961**
Bronze

**Relationship to Judaism and Israel**

While Gross came from a Hasidic family which faithfully observed the Jewish holidays and traditions, he avoided Jewish themes in his work for the first twenty five years of his career. The Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel led to a major shift in his art in the period following World War II. His brother, sister, brother-in-law, niece and
nephew were exterminated by the Nazis; his parents died of natural causes during the 1930s. The enormity of the destruction of European Jewry, combined with Gross’s deeply-felt personal losses, motivated a change in his art. His renewed emotional involvement with Judaism was also reinforced by his first visit to Israel, where he observed Hasidic Jews who reminded him of his own family and friends from early childhood in Austria, as well as diverse groups of Jewish immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East. Gross’s first visit to Israel was in 1949 and he returned at least twenty times, including trips taken in 1951, 1957, 1959, 1968, and 1975.

Chaim Gross has become well-known for his Jewish subjects, such as the majestic 1974 lithograph, *Rebirth* or his 1969 suite of 10 lithographs representing *The Jewish Holidays*. 
While Gross dismissed the notion of a separate “Jewish art,” in a way, the second half of his career added the title “Jewish artist” to his well-established reputation as a modern sculptor.

**Chaim Gross in Israel**

As noted, the creation of the State of Israel on May 14, 1948, and Gross’s subsequent visit to the state in 1949, inspired a renewed focus on Jewish subjects in his art. Gross visited Israel during a two-month trip to Europe, his first time back since he emigrated to the U.S. from Eastern Europe in 1921.

Gross recounted later in life the impact of this first trip to Israel:

*I visited Israel for the first time back in 1949, Israel at the age of one year… I returned there two years later and then a third time. I cannot begin to tell you what I took from my people, our people there. It was, in a sense, a rebirth for me, a new inspiration of that which has guided me from the time I was a little child.*

Elsewhere he recalled:

*When I went to Israel in 1949 and I saw my own kind of people – Orthodox Jews, Chasidic Jews – something happened to me, something was reawakened in me.*

In an unsuccessful application for a Fulbright grant inspired by his travel to Israel in 1949, Gross proposed to make a series of sculptures that would capture the many types of Jews he observed there, before the process of assimilation and integration began to dissolve their unique characteristics:

*My project was born during a short stay in Israel recently. I discovered a very moving and beautiful spectacle which will one day disappear. The influx of Jewish immigrants from most parts of Europe and the Near East brought a wealth of contrasts into a land where they will be absorbed and become as one, losing all of their individuality. There has come into Israel, Yemenites, Iraqui (sic), Moroccans, Persians, North Africans, Austrians, Rumanians, Germans, Polish, Bulgarians, and many other Jews, all with distinctly different features, physiognomy, even movement and culture. It is especially those who have come from the Near East countries that I wish to capture in sculpture….*

Two sketchbooks in the Gross Foundation archives, on display in this exhibition, with drawings from the first Israel trip take us along with Gross during his journey. He first went to the port city of Jaffa and then to Gedera; then on to the coastal city of Caesarea, where he made this sketch of an ancient archway with a barbed-wire barrier below:
He then went to Ashkelon and Majdal, followed by Tel Aviv, where he made this sketch of city life:

The drawings in the sketchbook relay that Gross also traveled to Jerusalem, Nazareth, and Haifa, before moving on to Rome, Italy and other Italian cities.

Included in the exhibition is this lithograph from an original watercolor of Nazareth c.1950.
And a street scene capturing café life in Jerusalem:

Untitled (Jerusalem), 1951
Watercolor on paper
Soon after returning from Israel Gross carved this very large 91-inch 1950 sculpture with the biblical subject of Lot’s Wife:

Its expressive elongation seems inspired by Giacometti’s contemporaneous sculptures from the late 1940s.

As Roberta Tarbell notes in her biographical essay on Gross, Hebrew iconography was absent in Chaim Gross’s art before 1947, the year he carved *In Memoriam: My Sister Sarah, Victim of Nazi Atrocities* (now in the Hirschhorn Museum, Washington D.C.) in cocobolo wood. In 1949 he also created a proposed monument in memory of the six million Jews murdered in Europe as part of a competition at the Jewish Museum in New York City. The monument, intended to be placed in Riverside Park between 83rd and 84th streets, was never built.
From 1950 to 1957 he carved seven variations of the theme of Lot’s Wife in wood. *Naomi and Ruth*, featured in this exhibition, was carved in stone in 1956 and during the 1960s Gross designed and cast monumental menorahs for such synagogues as Temple Sinai in Pittsburgh, Congregation Adath Jeshurun in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, and for the Menorah Home for the Aged in Brooklyn (1964). He also created six nine-and-one-half-foot-high bronze relief panels of the Ten Commandments for the International Synagogue at Kennedy Airport:
Chaim Gross’s *Ten Commandments* at the International Synagogue at John F. Kennedy International Airport, with Tablet detail (1970-71)

During the 1970s Old Testament subjects and Judaica predominated in Gross’s art. In 1976, Gross created sculptures of *Jacob’s Dream, Abraham and the Angels, In Memory of Six Million, Isaiah,* and *Jonah and the Whale.*

Still, Gross did not consider these sculptures “Jewish Art” because he felt there was no such thing as Jewish Art. In response to a question on the subject he said,

“*There is no Jewish art. Don’t call it Jewish art, because it is subject matter, not style. There are Jewish traditions, Judaica, and biblical subjects, and, also, artists who are Jews, but there is no Jewish art.*”

*Lot’s Wife* is on display now at the Chaim Gross Foundation, along with other later works with biblical subjects such as the 1956 *Naomi and Ruth* (on display here) and the 1962 *Judith.*
Gross returned to Israel for a second time in 1951. He stayed for three months to paint a series of 40 watercolors of life in various cities. The watercolors were exhibited at the Jewish Museum in New York from May-July 1953, Gross’s first solo show there. Gross drew the exhibition poster for the Jewish Museum exhibition:
After the exhibition, the watercolors were gifted to various institutions, including Brandeis University and Smith College, though one of the watercolors, a scene in Safed, is currently in the Gross Foundation’s collection and on display here:
Gross also created lithographs and posters, which had the same wide range of subject matter as his sculpture, watercolors, and drawings -- homages to artists, Jewish themes, performers, delineations of his dreams (fantasy prints), mothers playing with children, and fishermen. He also created posters to mark various anniversaries of the establishment of Israel as a new nation, including the 18th and 30th anniversaries pictured here.

18th Anniversary of Israel, 1965
As a contribution to the United Jewish Appeal’s 1967 campaign, Gross created an original lithograph (above) on the Talmudic theme of “He who saves a life, has saved the entire world.” The Hebrew letters are the initials of the words making up the phrase from the *Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin* 37a.
Rarely displayed in exhibitions of Gross’s work are his fantasy drawings, included in this exhibition of his sketchbooks.

Again from Tarbell:

Gross claims that his fantasy drawings are not surrealistic, but they do depict images from his dreams and his subconscious (nos. 137 - 39 and 161 - 63). He said to me: “I loved the surrealists and knew Max Ernst very well during the war.” He also explained that the early (1943) fantasy drawings show the horror and bitterness he felt, caused by the slaughter of the Jewish people under the Hitler regime. “My mind was bothering me,” he said. He retained a spirit of joy in his sculpture by using the fantasy drawings, with their needles, mesh fences, and other potentially torturous objects, as a safety valve. He depicts both birds of prey and birds of peace; rings of marriage and rings representing unrequited love; and hands both loving and destructive. The fantasy drawings are composed on relatively small sheets with a fine-pointed (crow quill) pen and ink. To create these drawings Gross sat completely relaxed in an armchair in his own living room and listened to classical music; images from his subconscious mind were released and flowed onto the paper.
Chaim Gross on Israel:

(undated manuscript, The Renee and Chaim Gross Foundation Archives)

There are many reasons why a person such as I has loved Israel and is committed to its further development and growth:

As an aspiring artist who came to America a penniless boy of seventeen, I benefitted from the opportunities it gave me to live, to study, to grow on social and political freedom. I was inspired by the biblical principles of Justice and Compassion that guided it….and for the same reasons that I have loved America, I love Israel.

But I do so as well, of course, out of deep personal identification with an historical and spiritual heritage of more than 5000 years, that is there to sustain every Jewish person, wherever he may be in the world/.

In spite of much suffering of the Jewish people everywhere, I well know the wonder of the idealized dream of the Jewish people who waited so long for the miracle to be realized, as the State of Israel: And though only thirty five years young, its accomplishments in every human endeavor is the wonder of the world….in reclamation of the land to bloom and flourish, in education, in scientific exploration, Israelis started to build universities even before there was enough food. Hence, in this small land the miracle goes on daily, accomplishments that are astonishing, for they are constantly expanding, developing their creative energies with moral, intellectual dignity at all times. And they offer to aid and share their knowledge of how to get the most out of the land, with other human beings, honestly, decently…if only their neighbors would accept it.

But beyond these reasons, one need only to go to Israel, as I first did in 1949, returning there again and again –at least twenty times – in the intervening years, to be thrilled and excited at how the desert has been transformed from barren and empty place to a rich garden of nature and human industriousness. I derive great pleasure in cities growing in the way petals unfold on a new flower, universities which had only one or two buildings are now whole cities and some like Haifa University reaching the skies; farms pioneered in the way that America’s farmland had been, and new and expanding orchards laden heavily with fruit. And to think that all this was created by our own people gives me great hope that the dream will be continued, be fulfilled. The gardens in the desert must bloom to such abundance where the Jewish people and all their neighbors can live together in mutual help and Peace for all mankind to share its fruits.
Bibliography


Chaim Gross, Undated manuscripts on Jewish art and themes, The Renee and Chaim Gross Foundation Archives.

For more information: [http://www.rcgrossfoundation.org/foundation/](http://www.rcgrossfoundation.org/foundation/)
**Visions of Israel: The Art and Illustrations of Chaim Gross**

**Exhibition Inventory**

All works from the collection of the Renee and Chaim Gross Foundation, New York unless otherwise noted.

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The Maurice Greenberg Center for Judaic Studies

Founded in the 1984-85 academic year through the generous gift of Arnold C. and Beverly Greenberg, the Maurice Greenberg Center is a dynamic center which offers three different undergraduate degrees, maintains the Museum of Jewish Civilization and through a consortial agreement with the University of Connecticut offers a graduate program. The undergraduate major in the Maurice Greenberg Center for Judaic Studies provides a unified and cohesive major within the College of Arts and Sciences and utilizes the established resources of two other colleges (College of Education and the Hartt School for the Performing Arts). The Bachelor of Arts in Judaic Studies allows students to focus in three pivotal areas: Judaic Studies; Judaic Studies and Elementary Education; and Judaic Studies and Pre-Cantorial Studies. Judaic Studies is an interdisciplinary program of study which focuses on the Jews and Judaism, including but not limited to, historical, linguistic, religious, sociological, political, and philosophical perspectives. The chronological scope of Judaic Studies spans the periods from the beginnings of ancient Israel through the modern Jews and modern Israel. In addition to the academic studies, the Center maintains an active community outreach division that runs teacher workshops on the teaching of the Holocaust and the teaching of Israel and the Middle East, and has an active lecture, concert, exhibition, and symposium schedule that is open to the public. In cooperation with the Jewish Federation of Greater Hartford, the Greenberg Center has offered an Israeli visiting professor who works both in the university and in the community during the past decade. Summer programs at our field school in Israel at Kibbutz Ginosar are a part of the Bethsaida Excavations Project Consortium and students study archaeology, Hebrew and Arabic in summer terms. For more information on the Greenberg Center, please visit: http://www.hartford.edu/greenberg/

Richard A. Freund, Director
Avinoam Patt, Associate Director
DreAnna Hadash, Guest Curator
Susan Gottlieb, Administrative Assistant