

Pam Rosenblatt

Artist Samuel Rothbort and his memories paintings

The word “Memories” has been defined as reminiscences, recollections, memoirs, recalls, remembrances, retentions, commemorations, celebrations, and memorials.¹ To many people, “memories” suggest past experiences that dwell in their minds from childhood, adulthood, special events and holidays, and perhaps education, etc. But when a person goes through a difficult time or times, these memories may become vital to his or her existence. And this person may not want to even remember some of his memories but he does so with the intent to prevent some evil from happening again.

On Monday, November 30, 2015, *Wilderness House Literary Review's* arts editor Pam Rosenblatt had the honor to interview Kelsey Johnson, the PR and Social Media Associate at the Boca Raton Museum of Art in Boca Raton, Florida about the museum’s current show, *History Becomes Memory*.

Rosenblatt also had the opportunity to correspond by email with Janice Caban, the granddaughter of artist Samuel Rothbort whose “Memories of the Shtetl” was the introductory exhibit of *History Becomes Memory*.



History Becomes Memory consisted of five parts that dealt with the narrowness of thought that steers a society into murder, genocide, and war.² *History Becomes Memory* is an educational response to an international dialogue concerning anti-Semitism. It commemorates the 70th anniversary close of World War II and the Holocaust. The show happened from September 11, 2015 through January 10, 2015.³

Besides Rothbort, established contemporary artists Terry Berkowitz, Shimon Attie, Renata Stih, and Frieder Schnock, and Izhar Patkin also participated in *History Becomes Memory* with installations that dealt with anti-Semitism in dynamic ways.

Berkowitz, Attie, Stih and Schnock, and Patkin all investigated bigotry, fear, resilience, and the need for a homeland in their individual installations.⁴ These are powerful works and leave the audience aware that memories are important to remember and to learn from so that history does not repeat itself unnecessarily.

Unlike the other exhibits in *History Becomes Memory*, Samuel Rothbort’s “Memories of the Shtetl” is more subdued and pastoral. His “Flour Carriers to Store”, (c. 1950s, Watercolor on paper, 11x 14 inches); “Jewish Windmills” (c. 1950s, Watercolor on paper, 11 x 14), “Returning from the Fair”, (c. 1950s, Watercolor on paper, 11 x 14), and “Rye Wagon Going Through Town” (1956, Watercolor on paper, 11 x 14) are simply a few of the samples of a life that no longer exists, that has disappeared from that area now called Belarus.

1 Microsoft Word 2010, “Memories” defined, December 13, 2015.

2 Boca Raton Museum of Art Press Release, “History Becomes Memory, five installations commemorating the end of WWII, opens September 11, 2015”.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

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“Samuel Rothbort’s works are actually the oldest and probably the most traditional in the exhibit. And he has these really magnificent water-color paintings that he did not create in the shtetls of his homeland, Czarist Russia, but in New York after he actually immigrated there many years later,” Johnson said.



Rothbort was born in 1882 in a rural Russian town named Wolkovysk. He learned sculpting in his early youth by creating bread dough sculptures of animals while in his mother’s kitchen. As he grew up, he was employed in a glassware shop, painted charcoal portraits that cost fifty cents, and studied to be a leather expert.⁵

As a youngster, he worked as a cantor, who travelled to the various shtetls and sang. But when he reached Brooklyn, he became a laborer and painted murals.⁶ He entered the world of interior decorating. Someone recognized his talent for art and suggested that Rothbort enter the art field. He did just that and worked with found objects – a lot of left over wood and assemblages. He was a crafter of artwork, in a sense, said Johnson.

“He did some flowers. He did some cityscapes of New York. And he had some exhibitions. So he was forging ahead as an artist,” she continued.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Rothbort began painting scenes of Wolkovysk. He painted about 600 watercolors of his homeland recollections. Rothbort was in his sixties when he began to paint with watercolors these memories of his youth in the shtetl. “It is really fascinating because these works are places that...no longer exist,” Johnson said.

A self-trained artist, Rothbort appreciated the works of Rembrandt Harmenszoon Van Rijn (1606-1669) and of Henri Fantin-Latour (1836-1904). In fact, Rothbort stylized a self-portrait after Rembrandt’s technique, and he even dressed in clothes similar to those of Rembrandt for this painting. Rothbort enjoyed painting flowers, too, and Fantin-Latour was known for his florals.⁷

Rothbort also created landscapes and still lives. He used natural impressionist techniques achieved with such mediums as oil, watercolor, and pen and ink as well as stone and wood.⁸

“He used a broad range of vibrant colors,” explained Janice Caban,

5 Smithsonian American Art Museum and the Renwick Gallery, “Search Collections: Samuel Rothbort”, 12/12/2015,

p. 1. <http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artist/?id=7070>

6 David’s Art Expo, “The Art and Sculpture of Samuel Rothbort”, 12/12/2015, p.1.

<http://www.davidsartexpo.com/the-art-sculpture-of-samuel-rothbort/>

7 Janice Caban, Wilderness House Literary Review Interview, December 2, 2015.

8 Ibid.

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the granddaughter of Rothbort, in a December 2, 2015 *Wilderness House Literary Review* email interview. "Since he was usually painting directly from life, he used colors that he saw at the moment that was painting. He did not alter the colors to suit his style or mood. Although he painted a great variety of flowers of various colors, he was well known for his white florals of roses, peonies and dahlias. Often the flowers were arranged painted with a white draped fabric back drop. My grandmother often arranged this. There was always one of these flower pieces displayed in the window of the Barzansky Gallery on Madison Avenue from the 1940s to the 1960s."

Rothbort's memory artworks have generated great interest to the public over the last few decades. "These works served as part of the inspiration for the set of *Fiddler on the Roof*, the Jerome Robbins production. You probably can remember this one scene [in the movie] where he is laying on the roof there," recalled Johnson.

In the *Memories of the Shtetl* exhibition, the coinciding Rothbort piece to the *Fiddler on the Roof* is titled "Wild Geese in Formation" (c. 1950s, Watercolor on paper, 11 x 14).

Lisa Yuskavage, *The Ones That Don't Want To: Buttons*, 1991. Private Collection, London. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner, New York/London. His memories artworks were also the basis for another well-known film, *The Ghetto Pillow*, by Harriet Semegram, which was the inspiration for the *Memories of the Shtetl* exhibition at the Boca Raton Museum of Art.

Rothbort's paintings are so special because of the strength of his imagery and how this imagery strongly recalls that era and time before World War II. His works have developed into a larger cultural experience that always have had a great impact on his audience.

In 1904, Rothbort left Czarist Russia with many memories from growing up during a peaceful time in a shtetl. While showing an innocence and a quaint lifestyle for the people of Wolkovysk, some of his memories paintings also reveal that a difficult time for the Jewish people of his community was approaching as seen in his "Without a Passport", (c. 1950s, Watercolor on paper, 11 x 14 inches). This piece is about two men and one young boy all wearing warm winter coats amidst lots and lots of snow as they watch an unseen group of people travel away from their town. These three people seem to be left behind, without passports.



In "Without a Passport", the audience can only imagine that there are others out of view in front of these three individuals who must be leaving the shtetl. It is a different, more somber tone than Rothbort's "My Grandfather's Pigeons" (c. 1950s, Watercolor on paper, 11 x 14) when there is a scene of several people playfully chasing after his grandfather's pigeons.

While based on reality, Rothbort's memories paintings were created decades after his youth. Some of these artworks may be considered to be reflective of a dream-like state as they may have been once moments in time that were very real. "But, I think,"

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Johnson said, “that they are very much memories – as truthful as they may or may not be – is probably a very accurate way to think about them.”

Samuel Rothbort died in 1971. Fortunately, his memories paintings live on.

Memories of the Shtetl



Samuel Rothbort, Rye Wagon Going Through Town, 1956. Watercolor on paper, 11 x 14 inches.



Samuel Rothbort, Without a Passport, c. 1950s. Watercolor on paper, 11 x 14 inches.



Samuel Rothbort, *Flour Carriers to Store*, c. 1950s. Watercolor on paper, 11 x 14 inches.



Samuel Rothbort, *Jewish Windmills*, c. 1950s. Watercolor on paper, 11 x 14 inches.



Samuel Rothbort, *My Grandfather's Pigeons*, c. 1950s. Watercolor on paper, 11 x 14 inches.



Samuel Rothbort, *Returning from Fair*, c. 1950s. Watercolor on paper, 11 x 14 inches.