

History and art unpacked

Murals that once hung in Elizabeth — then spent decades in the closet — to be displayed in Whippany

By [JOANNE PALMER](#) July 7, 2021, 5:00 pm



Elijah rides into Jerusalem amid images of pioneers and pious men building a Jewish homeland in what still was Palestine.

Art never is just art.

It comes with context — it was made in a particular place, in a specific time, by a person who grew up in a time and place, or by a group who similarly were not plunked onto this earth from a featureless void.

Art also often can be history and sociology and ethnology; it can show dreams and aspirations and terrors.

[Get The Jewish Standard Newsletter by email and never miss our top stories](#) [FREE SIGN UP](#)

There's a lot of history attached to the murals — originally there were six, now they're four — that used to hang at the YM-YWHA of Elizabeth.



Kenneth Mandel, the interim director of the YM-YWHA of Union County, Ruth Brewster, and archivist Linda Forgosh stand with the murals, newly delivered to Whippany. (All photos courtesy of the Jewish Historical Society of New Jersey)

There's the story they tell — of American Jews in the late 1930s; of their yearning for what was then Palestine; of the artist who created them, A. Raymond Katz; of the man who commissioned them, Harry Lebau; of the city where they once hung and then languished, Elizabeth; and of the community that moved away but did not dissolve.

This is their story.

Raymond Katz was a Hungarian-born, New York-raised, Cooper Union-educated artist — he added the Raymond later, his first name really was Alexander, and in real life he was known as Sandor — who made his career in Chicago, first as cartoonist, then as a poster designer who worked for President Roosevelt’s WPA — the Depression-era Works Project Administration, which was a lifeline for artists and a source of marvelous art. Mr. Katz found himself drawn to Jewish art



Elijah rides into Jerusalem amid images of pioneers and pious men building a Jewish homeland in what still was Palestine.

In 1938, he paid a visit to the Y in Elizabeth.

There’s an undated online piece about Katz — probably written in the 1940s — that’s part of the Illinois Historical Art Project. It’s fascinating both in its details about him and in its decidedly odd if period style. It focuses on the

tension visible in Katz's art between his American and Jewish identities. As he confronted the assumption that he could not paint human figures, Katz's "work in the ten murals that adorned the Hebrew section of the Hall of Religions at A Century of Progress met with the approval of the pious of his race from the four corners of the earth," we read.

He "has the incalculable advantage of having 'gone abstract' with intelligence, as did Picasso," it continues. "Practically all his fellow abstractionists in America and most in Europe have been imitators of the Parisians, hollow and empty."

That sanguine view of his work did not hold up.



Kenny Mandel and Ruth Brewster bring the murals from Union to Whippany.

He "was not a major force in the art world at the height of his career or now," sniffed the curator of collections at the Jewish Museum in Manhattan, as reported in a letter sent in 1993. But his work is "culturally specific...an unusual fusion of regionalist style and Zionist iconography," it continued.

Harry Lebau was, among many other important things in the Jewish community, the Y's executive director. Ruth Brewster of Hillside is his daughter.

Until the 1930s, Elizabeth's Jews lived near the city's port, but as they became more successful, they began to move uptown, Ms. Brewster said. That's when the community decided to build a new Y, on East Jersey Street. "It had a huge auditorium," she said. "It was the way they used to design buildings, with spaces where you could hang things. These had these huge empty spaces." According to a 1955 story in Commentary, called "Synagogue Art Today," there were four arched spaces that were 15 feet high and 8 feet wide; two smaller spaces were 6 feet by 4 feet.



Harry Lebau

“My father was super brilliant and very in touch with people’s needs,” Ms. Brewster said. “He had a theory that he called self-actualization. It was that people had jobs that were not fulfilling, had life experiences in general that were not fulfilling. He thought that the Y could provide a variety of activities so that everyone could come in and find something for him or herself that could give them a feeling of personal satisfaction.

“This was at the height of the Depression,” she added. “He felt that art was one of those areas.”

So when Sandor Katz got to the Y as a speaker, “Katz saw the empty spaces, and Katz said, ‘I can do murals for you to fill them,’ and my father said, ‘How much would you charge per mural?’ Katz said \$100. So my father plunked down \$25 from his pocket,” — during the Depression, that was real money — “and he said, ‘We need them.’

“And that’s how they came to be.



Harry and Mary Lebau

“My father fund-raised the rest of the money,” she continued. “And I hope he got that \$25 back. I wore hand-me-downs.”

Harry Lebau and his wife, Mary Nanes Lebau, were extraordinary people, who deserve their own story. “I was so blessed with my family,” Ms. Brewster said. But the rest of the story of their accomplishments is not for here.

The murals hung in the Y until 1965, when it moved to Union. “They rolled them up and put them in a basement closet,” Ms. Brewster said. The architecture was very different. “There was no room to hang them. For many years, there was a concerted effort to find a new home for them.” Despite the hard work many people put into that effort, it failed. The murals continued to languish.



Three different images of Shabbat.

Now, though, they are out of the closet. The murals have been moved to the climate-controlled archive of the Jewish Historical Society of New Jersey at the Alex Aidekman Family Jewish Community Campus in Whippany. They will be displayed there as soon as possible, the historical society's executive director, Linda Forgosh, said, and when they are, the society also will offer guided tours of its facilities and holdings.

"Katz's art sells for anywhere from a few hundred dollars to thousands of dollars," Ms. Brewster said. "He was not a major figure. But this is an example of WPA art." (It was not, of course, actually WPA art, but made by a WPA artist during the time that the WPA was operating.)

"They are a snapshot of the past, and it should not be lost. It is our history."

Joel Silverstein of Mahwah is an artist and a member of the Jewish Art Salon. He's well-versed in 20th-century American Jewish art.



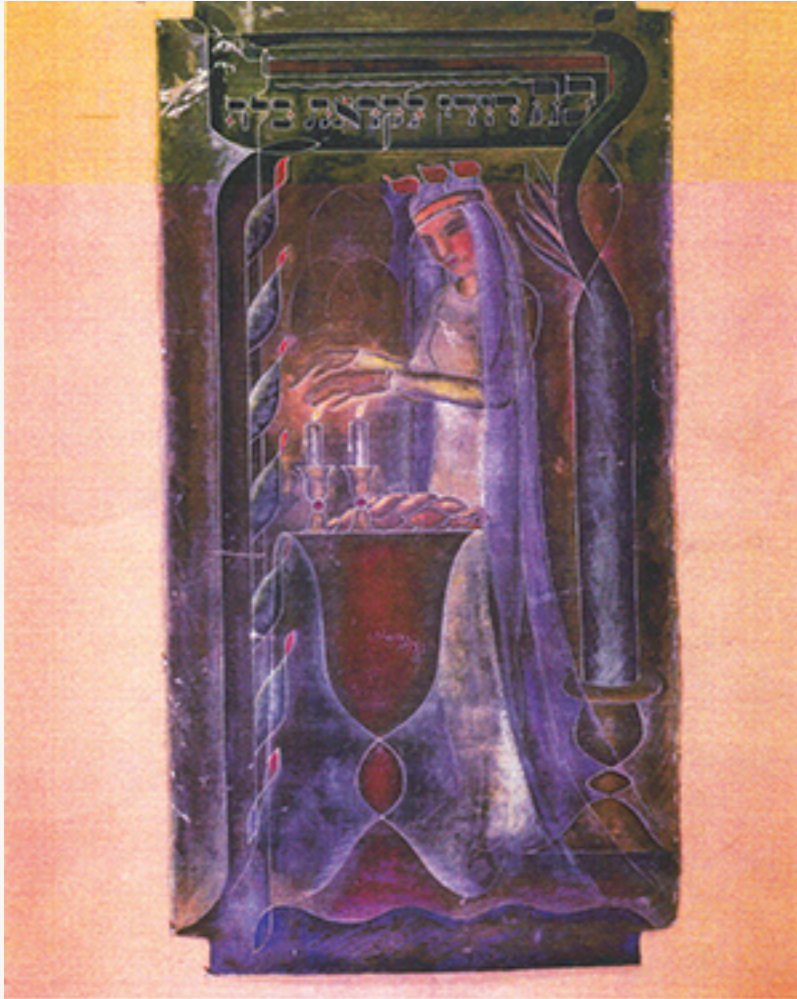
I have a fondness for this kind of art,” Mr. Silverstein said. “Now we’re looking again at the WPA murals. All through my art school years, they were seen as kitsch and bad, as bogus, as bad figurative art and a remnant of American regionalism, which was seen as right-wing. But now Thomas Hart Benson has been totally rehabilitated, and even Grant Wood is now seen as a hero.

“Identity is suddenly being celebrated, as is stylistic diversity.”

Katz’s style is “stylistically not unusual,” Mr. Silverstein continued. “Like a lot of other Jewish Americans from this period, it’s a synthesis of figurative and abstract. It’s a breakdown of abstraction and futurism and cubism but melded to classical composition.” Many artists of the time “mixed cubist drawing with academic drawing,” and so did Katz. “His design comes out of

cubism, but the content and narratives are from figurative art,” he said. It reminds him as well of the work of Ben Shahn and of Diego Rivera, he added.

The more interesting part of the murals is how Katz’s work “could be American and still pay homage to Greco-Roman tradition. That’s a double whammy, but for Jews like Katz, it’s a double-double whammy.”



Although Katz was working well within the Jewish tradition, often for Jewish institutions like the Elizabeth Y, much of his work was for synagogues and he painted human figures. That’s because the prohibition against showing the human figure wasn’t uninformedly introduced until the Enlightenment, in the 18th century. “The notion that Jews are against imagery really is a European idea that came about because Jews aligned themselves with German Protestants of the 18th

and 19th centuries,” Mr. Silverstein said. In other words, the ban is derived from the Second Commandment, but its general philosophical application was rooted in German assimilation. “This was the biggest idea in Jewish secular intellectual circles. All Jewish kids grew up with the idea that visual arts are not kosher, that they are somehow disrespectful to Jewish practice. This is not the case.

“Katz is in the tradition of first- and second-generation Jews who either weren’t born here, or were just born here, and were exposed to traditional Western art,” he continued. “Not only did some poor, talented, very lucky Jewish kids, like Hyman Bloom and Jack Levine, get Ivy League scholarships but all of them were able to go to the settlement houses, where art courses were offered free.”

Mr. Silverstein was struck by how Zionist Katz’s work was. One of the 1938 murals includes a figure that seems to be the prophet Elijah, riding his donkey into Jerusalem. There’s a dinner that seems to be a Passover seder; the implication is “next year in Jerusalem.” There are images of people working the soil as well as of the Sabbath queen. There’s a Jewish wedding inside a Jewish star. “This seems to be about Jewish accomplishment and projecting a positive future,” Mr. Silverstein said.

Alexander Raymond Sandor Katz “is in the ranks of other Jewish artists, like Abraham Rattner and Ben Shahn,” he concluded. “Something exciting is really going on in his art. He knows how to design. He knows how to use space and tell a story.

“I think that people should know about him. I think that Jewish artists should know about him.”

And now, thanks to the efforts of many people over many decades, and most specifically thanks to Ruth Brewster, and then to Linda Forgosh, people, including Jewish artists, will have the chance to learn about Sandor Katz.

