

Janet Sobel: Primitivist, Surrealist, and Abstract Expressionist

Author(s): Gail Levin

Source: *Woman's Art Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Spring - Summer, 2005), pp. 8-14

Published by: Woman's Art Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3566528>

Accessed: 07-12-2019 17:46 UTC

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

https://www.jstor.org/stable/3566528?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Woman's Art Inc. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Woman's Art Journal*

JANET SOBEL

Primitivist, Surrealist, and Abstract Expressionist

By Gail Levin

The feminist movement was already underway, when, in 1968, William Rubin, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), traveled to Plainfield, New Jersey, to meet Janet Sobel (1894-1968). By then bedridden and near death, she felt honored when he acquired her nonobjective painting, *Milky Way* (1945), for the museum's permanent collection (as well as a second, smaller work for himself, which he would later donate).¹ Rubin was interested in Sobel because her "all-over drip" paintings, including *Milky Way*, had influenced the abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock, a fact first remarked in the late 1950s by no less an authority than the critic Clement Greenberg.

When in 1958 Greenberg revised a 1955 essay, "American-Type Painting," he added Sobel, discounting the influence on Pollock of Mark Tobey and asserting:

Back in 1944, however, he [Pollock] had noticed one or two curious paintings shown at Peggy Guggenheim's by a 'primitive' painter, Janet Sobel (who was, and still is, a housewife living in Brooklyn). Pollock (and I myself) admired these pictures rather furtively: they showed schematic little drawings of faces almost lost in a dense tracery of thin black lines lying over and under a mottled field of predominantly warm and translucent color."

Greenberg, who surely understood that Sobel painted with a naïf's approach to the night sky or to the rhythms of music, categorized her technique as "the first really 'all-over' one that I had ever seen, since Tobey's show came months later." Greenberg further allowed as how he found it "strangely pleasing," adding: "Later on, Pollock admitted that these pictures had made an impression on him."²

Following in the wake of Greenberg, Rubin wrote in 1967: "Pollock arrived at his all-over style without having seen the Tobey's," adding that "he had seen, however, in 1944 and again in 1946, a few paintings by Janet Sobel, which prophesied his own style even more closely than did the Tobey's."³ Rubin's position later was refuted by Judith S. Kays, who, in 1997, reasserted Tobey's influence on Pollock, taking Rubin to task for errors and unsubstantiated argument.⁴ Kays objected to Rubin's placement of Sobel's all-over canvas *Music* (1944; Pl. 5) "in a group show at Peggy Guggenheim Art of This Century early in 1944," when Sobel did not show there until 1945. Kays also pointed out that Greenberg's claim in 1958 that Tobey's show came months later" is inaccurate, although accepted by Rubin, since Tobey showed his all-over paintings at the Willard Gallery during April 4-29, 1944, actually preceding slightly Sobel's first solo show at the Puma Gallery, which opened on April 24, 1944, and remained on view through May 14.

Pollock did, however, see Sobel's Puma Gallery show. Pollock's friend, the painter Peter Busa, told an interviewer: "When Jackson first saw her show at the Puma Gallery, he was very enthralled with it."⁵ Although a checklist of the 26 works shown at the Puma Gallery exists, not all of the titles can be identified. At the same time, a 1944 review in the *Brooklyn Eagle* discussed the exhibition

of "her latest painting," *Music*, which did not make the checklist. Some figurative works were also on the list.⁶ Emily Genauer, reviewing the show, singled out "compositions like *Retreating Horses* and *Heavenly Quarrel*, in which the artist has painted her subjects on glass, modeling her figures in calligraphic whorls, giving them a great feeling of movement."⁷ Pollock may also have seen Sobel's work in September 1944, in a group show at the Norlyst Art Gallery curated by Eleanor Lust and Jimmy Ernst.

We can be sure, too, that Pollock knew Sobel's *Music*, for it appeared as a full-page color reproduction that year in Sidney Janis's *Abstract & Surrealist Art in America*. Janis also reproduced a color plate of Pollock's *She-Wolf*, as well as a black-and-white reproduction of *Composition* (1943) by Lee Krasner.⁸ While Janis classified "Leonore Krassner" as one of the "American Abstract Painters," along with Stuart Davis, Willem de Kooning, and her teacher Hans Hofmann, he placed both Sobel and Pollock with the "American Surrealist Painters," along with Mark Tobey, William Baziotas, Jimmy Ernst, Dorothea Tanning, Adolph Gottlieb, and Mark Rothko, among others. It is very likely, too, that Pollock saw the traveling group show organized to celebrate the publication of Janis's book, culminating in New York at Mortimer Brandt Gallery, from November 29 through December 30, 1944. This exhibition included Pollock's *Mad Moon Woman* (1941), Sobel's *Music* (1944), Tobey's *Threading Light* (1942), and Krasner's *Composition* (1943), as well as works by 46 other artists.

Sobel told Janis that *Music* was inspired by Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony. Janis quoted Sobel about this work: "*Music* is my impression of the music of Shostakovich created in a world torn by war and bloodshed. Shostakovich has captured the power of the Russian people and by his music has given them strength. His music has so stimulated me and I have tried to present these feelings in my picture."⁹ In the Seventh Symphony, first played in 1942, the composer reacted to the horrors of the siege of Leningrad and the deaths caused by the Nazis and by Stalin's orders, themes that clearly resonated with Sobel.

Given the prominent exhibition history documented for Sobel's *Music*, with its dripped enamel paint in an all-over pattern, it is not surprising that *Milky Way*, which quite closely resembles *Music*, recommended itself to Rubin for acquisition. Both *Music* and *Milky Way* appeared in Sobel's 1946 solo show at Peggy Guggenheim's gallery, Art of This Century.¹⁰ Pollock, too, employed astronomical themes in titles of the immediately succeeding years, although he was still working with traditional oil paints. However, in 1947 he added aluminum paint and gravel to the oil in *Galaxy*, and used enamel paint, together with oil and aluminum paint, in the large dripped canvas *Lucifer*. The enamel paint that Sobel used in *Milky Way* came from her husband's costume jewelry business.

Greenberg wrote to Sobel's son Sol in 1971, confirming and reiterating his opinion: "Thank you for your note about your mother & her art. Yes, I did give Bill Rubin his lead. (I was impressed by the same painting, independently, that Pollock was impressed by;



Fig. 1. Janet Sobel, *Through the Glass* (c. 1944), enamel on glass, oil and sand on canvas, 26½" x 29¾". Courtesy Gary Snyder Gallery, New York.



Fig. 2. Janet Sobel, *The Advisor* (1943), oil on masonite, 24" x 24". Courtesy Gary Snyder Gallery, New York.

isn't it in Peggy Guggenheim's collection now? Pollock told me, in 1948 when he saw—in reproduction—his first Tobey, that he thought your mother was better.) I, too, would like to see you."¹¹

By 1945, Sobel was attracting attention that was remarkable, especially considering that critics had identified her a year earlier as "a housewife from Brooklyn who really does have a delightful decorative flair for pattern and color," and as a "primitive," and "an unschooled artist."¹² She was juried into "The Women" at Peggy Guggenheim's gallery, where her abstractions appeared alongside works by such important women artists as Leonora Carrington, Kay Sage, and Hedda Sterne. Her entry prompted one reviewer to comment that "Sobel is responsible for one of the most joyous chromatic expressions seen this season."¹³

Guggenheim followed up in January 1946 by giving Sobel her second solo show.¹⁴ That June *PM* magazine published an illustrated chart, "How to Look at Modern Art in America," by the abstract expressionist painter Ad Reinhardt. He located Sobel next to Mark Tobey and in close association with Stanley William Hayter, Arshile Gorky, André Masson, Joseph Solman, and Ben Zion.¹⁵ By the end of 1946, a WCBS radio commentator could refer to Sobel as "one of America's most talked-about Surrealist painters."¹⁶

Sobel had ridden the crest of a wave of interest in Surrealism during and just after the Second World War. The obsessive quality of her art, her expressive authenticity, and her naive esthetic fit perfectly into the surrealists' program. Following the lead of André Breton, the surrealists fostered the acceptance of naive art. The moment for a self-taught artist like Sobel was thus auspicious: she created a narrative oeuvre, usually worked on densely filled compositions in a compulsive manner, and on most any available surface. Thus her work appealed to proponents of Surrealism from Max Ernst to Sidney Janis to Fernando Puma.

Yet Sobel's fame proved fleeting. She had faded into obscurity by the time that Greenberg in 1958 chose to favor her over Mark Tobey as an influence on Pollock. Greenberg, as a promoter of Pollock's ascendancy, no doubt preferred to share credit with the marginal Sobel rather than the prominent and successful Tobey. Yet Pollock must have seen Tobey's paintings with "white writing," which were on view contemporaneously with Sobel's first

show. Indeed, at the time more than one critic remarked that Sobel used "her own version of white writing," clearly linking her work with Tobey's.

Until *Milky Way* was acquired by Rubin in 1968 and shown among the recent acquisitions at the Museum of Modern Art in 1970, two decades had elapsed since Sobel's work had been exhibited in New York City.¹⁷ After the burst of activity during and just after World War II, neither galleries nor museums paid her further attention. In 1982, however, Charlotte Streifer Rubinstein, in her book *American Women Artists*, identified Sobel as among the artists exhibiting in Peggy Guggenheim's 1945, "The Women," and mentioned in an endnote that "Jackson Pollock claimed that Janet Sobel's work had a big influence on him."¹⁸ The next year Elizabeth Frank, in her monograph on Jackson Pollock, made a brief reference to Sobel, citing Greenberg's report that he and Pollock had admired Sobel's "allover paintings."¹⁹ In 1990, Jeffrey Wechsler became the first to include Sobel's work in a revisionist show of Abstract Expressionism, which explored issues of scale.²⁰ In 1995, the contemporary painter Elizabeth Murray singled out Sobel's *Milky Way* for inclusion in "Artist's Choice: Modern Women," an exhibition that she organized for MoMA. Since then, Ann Eden Gibson has included a brief discussion of Sobel in *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (1997).²¹ Most recently, in 2002 and 2003, Gary Snyder Fine Art in New York organized two shows of Sobel's work.²² Reviewing the first for the *New York Times*, Roberta Smith commented that Sobel represented "a complex mix of innate Outsider, folk and Surrealist instincts," and noted that it was "great that her short strange career is visible again."²³

Janet Sobel's meteoric fame was as remarkable as her subsequent obscurity was undeserved. She underwent an astounding metamorphosis from the woman who was born Jennie Lechovsky in a shtetl near Ekaterinoslav, Ukraine, in 1894,²⁴ during a period when upheavals—cultural, political, and economic—had begun to challenge settled ways. Her father, Bernard Lechovsky, was killed in one of the many pogroms, which were outbursts of anti-Semitic



Fig. 3. Janet Sobel, *Untitled* (1941), pen and ink on paper, 10" x 7½". Courtesy Gary Snyder Gallery, New York.



Fig. 4. Janet Sobel, *Untitled* (c. 1941), gouache on paper, 11¾" x 8¾". Courtesy Gary Snyder Gallery, New York.

violence when shops and synagogues were destroyed and women raped, sometimes sanctioned if not actually organized by the Czarist government. After this loss, her mother, Fanny Kahn Lechowsky, who worked as a midwife, emigrated with her three children to the United States, landing at Ellis Island in 1908. Sobel told her children how she used to hide in the top of the family's large stove when "bad people" came into the family home, and she recounted how her family and most of the village once spent a night in jail.²⁵ Surviving such atrocities no doubt left young Janet with emotional scars.

Clues to Sobel's sense of her past may be gleaned from a 1944 article about her in New York's Yiddish newspaper, *Der Tag*: "She had already ingested the spirit of the progressive youth in Russia, which was inflamed by the then revolutionary epoch. As a Jewish child, she had already endured enough difficulty, enough problems, and enough pogroms to grasp the meaning and the importance of freedom which she encountered here in this country."²⁶ The reference to "progressive youth" indicates that Sobel was most likely aware of labor militancy, inspired by the General Jewish Workers' Union or Bund, as it was known. Founded by socialist intellectuals, the Bund not only challenged the political and social status quo, it also sought change in traditional Jewish culture.²⁷

Relieving her beleaguered mother of the obligation to support her, Janet married Max Sobel, also from the Ukraine (he was born Michael Zibulsky), in 1910, when she was only 16. (Their wedding certificate lists her age in 1910 as 21 and his as 23.) Max had trained as an engraver and a goldsmith in the Ukraine. The couple had five children, born between 1911 and 1927.²⁸ During their early years of marriage, Max was setting up various businesses without much success, while Janet took care of the children, helped only by her mother, who lived with the family. Conditions were so bad during the early years of the Depression that the older children were forced to drop out of high school to work and contribute to the family's income. The Sobels were then living in Coney Island, and Janet used to make potato knishes and send Lil-

lian and Stanley out to sell them on the beach.

By 1941, Max's business manufacturing costume jewelry had started to prosper and the family moved to Brighton Beach, overlooking the water. Janet could now afford to have some household help, but by then, the three eldest children were out of the house and married. Only after the death of her husband in 1956 did Janet begin to work in the jewelry business with her sons. Sol recalls that the business was his mother's source for both the enamel paint (that Pollock admired) and the glass pipettes that she used to drip the enamel onto her canvases.

Janet Sobel first began experimenting with art materials around 1939, when she was 45. By then, her youngest child was twelve and Sol nineteen.²⁹ One story has it that she began to draw on top of some of the

drawings that Sol brought home from his art classes at the Educational Alliance. Another is that Sol, while still in high school, had won a scholarship to the Art Students League, which, against his mother's wishes, he sought to give up. When she tried to convince him to continue, he reportedly exclaimed: "If you're so interested in art, why don't you paint?"³⁰ Whichever version is accurate, both agree that Sol provided his mother with paintbrushes and materials, and she was launched. Years later an interviewer described how she came to make art: "Janet told me that when she was 49 she heard a voice tell her she must paint. So she started oil painting as easily as most women would toss off a pan of muffins."³¹

Sol responded with energy and purpose to his mother's sudden obsession. He took some of her pictures to show his teachers at the Educational Alliance Art School, whose founder, Abbo Ostrowsky, was also a Jewish immigrant from the Ukraine. The teachers, Sol remembers, pronounced his mother's efforts worthwhile. Sobel herself, however, never sought art lessons. She even remarked in 1944: "No, I never went to museums much. I didn't have time and"—she apologized—"I didn't understand these things."³²

Sol did understand. An astute promoter as well as a devoted son, he sent letters introducing his mother's work to Max Ernst, Marc Chagall, John Dewey, and Sidney Janis, among others. Janis, then a collector of American primitives and, in 1942, author of *They Taught Themselves: American Primitive Painters of the 20th Century*, immediately became an enthusiast who recommended her work to others.³³ In 1942, Janis arranged Sobel's first painting sale and wrote her a warmly congratulatory letter.³⁴ Janis then recommended her to Harry Stone, who had a gallery called American Primitive Paintings, but who turned down the opportunity to show her work, prompting Janis to write to Sobel in 1943: "I found your work more exciting than I had expected and you must continue—regardless of what anyone says—to do sincere things that you really feel and want to paint."³⁵

It was probably Janis who brought Sobel to the attention of the

artist and dealer Fernando Puma, whose philosophy of art seemed ready-made to embrace her work. Puma asserted: "There is a great searching for primitives. Many collectors are sponsoring and pushing them—perhaps to make money, perhaps to set up an American art."³⁶ This assertion reads like a justification and manifesto for showing Sobel.

Sobel's show with Puma included works rooted in her Ukrainian girlhood, among them *Disappointment* (c. 1943; Pl. 6). The painting features a large, detached female face with a scar on her left cheek, juxtaposed with the top half of a horse. Both float above a figure wearing a clown costume. This imaginary scene, where two other female figures appear among a profusion of flowers, suggests a Ukrainian or Russian fairy tale.

The show created enough stir to attract the attention of prominent reviewers. Reporters responded to Sobel's persona as a mother of five with four grandchildren, which made excellent copy. Henry McBride called her show "entertaining" and wrote: "Mrs. Sobel's colors are unfailingly good, her imagination absolutely unrestricted, and her compositions hang together into well-knit and decorative units on the wall. Of all the so-called primitives to come to light recently, she is the gayest."³⁷ Emily Genauer, writing in the *New York World Telegram*, called Sobel's work "rather extraordinary," especially for "a middle-aged woman who only recently took up her brushes." She praised the "great feeling of movement," particularly in the paintings on glass, and declared that Sobel conceived "her pictorial structure with an astounding sophistication."³⁸

An *Art News* reviewer noted: "Janet Sobel, at the good age of fifty and after only five years of painting, has launched her first exhibition, at the Puma Gallery. Self-taught, imaginative, witty, and wholly unorthodox, this Russian-born artist has improvised a series of fantasies curiously both sophisticated and naive." The reviewer also remarked on her "weird personalized world of commingled images composed of forms sketched over forms and sprinklings of gay flowers" and singled out her paintings on glass.³⁹ One such work, now known as *Through the Glass* (1944; Fig. 1), contains just such strange personages amidst plant-like forms.

The reviewer for *Art Digest* pointed out the "recurring leit motif of near Persian richness of color and inventive design" and commented: "Some of the earlier all-over patterns suggest tapestry weaving. In later canvases, where the artist has used her own version of 'white writing,' you have to look sharply to see the forms and faces that emerge double image-wise in jewel toned duco, from behind an intricate curtain of cobwebby white lace."⁴⁰ The critic Carlyle Burrows concurred: "There is a touch of sophisticated 'white writing' here, but one is inclined to believe from the evidence at hand that the artist has never had a lesson in her life, nor been influenced in any conspicuous way. That is what makes her the painter she is!"⁴¹

Having given Sobel a successful show in 1944, Puma cited her in his 1947 book within the context of Surrealism: "There are two groups of surrealists. One does spontaneous combustion or automatic paintings which have an Alice-in-Wonderland quality...the hand moves along at will, depicting forms that spring out of the memory in the rush of subconscious emotion.... Spontaneity runs rampant and sometimes crystallizes into images unworldly." He then formulates a list of "automatic Surrealists," including Paul Klee, Joan Miró, and André Masson, among the better known; and he places Sobel "among the newcomers," along with, among others, Matta, Gorky, Tobey, Hofmann, and Pollock.⁴²

Another of those who responded positively to Sobel's work was Max Ernst. He brought Sobel to the attention of Peggy Guggenheim, then his wife. When Guggenheim's gallery presented the 1945 show, "The Women," in which Janet Sobel's work appeared,

the jury included, besides Ernst and Guggenheim, Marcel Duchamp, André Breton, James Johnson Sweeney, James Thrall Soby, and Howard Putzel.⁴³

In the catalogue essay for the solo show Guggenheim gave Sobel in 1946, Janis wrote: "Her beginnings, fresh as those of a child, were primitive, not in the sense of crude and awkward strivings many believe primitive to mean, but in a truer sense, that of *original*, source inspiration."⁴⁴ Janis had already chosen Sobel as one of only a dozen 20th-century artists for "American Primitive Painting of Four Centuries," a show he organized for the Arts Club of Chicago in the fall of 1943. Now, little more than two years later, Janis claimed: "Mrs. Sobel's work is no longer primitive and has taken another direction.... Today her paintings are filled with unconscious surrealist phantasy." He further argued that her pictures embodied "the intense hallucinatory phantasy that often intuitively parallels in concept and spirit the work of leaders of surrealism such as Ernst and Masson."⁴⁵

Among the works included in Sobel's solo show at Art of This Century were *Music, Milky Way, Summer* (1941), *Pro & Contre* (1941; Pl. 7), and *The Advisor* (1943; Fig. 2). *Pro & Contre* depicts several women beneath flowering trees. The female in the center, dressed in a red patterned dress, appears to be young, while the one on our left, in more subdued blue, has the sagging shape of an older woman. Another woman and a small girl walk off to the right. Just what the two main figures are for and against is not clear, but this could be a mother and a daughter in disagreement. In *The Advisor*, set in a garden, two gaily dressed women in colorful head coverings flank two bearded men, who resemble rabbis, one of whom has a book open on the table at which he is seated.

Despite her disclaimer, Sobel did have some exposure to work by other contemporary artists. One of her extant drawings (1941; Fig. 3), depicting several female figures among some plants, appears on a page torn from the cover of a catalogue of a Salvador Dali exhibition held in 1941 at MoMA, suggesting that she may have gone to the show, or at the very least she knew Dali's work in reproduction. An article published in 1946 reported an interview with Sobel in which she contradicted her earlier statement that she had not frequented museums: "She loves to visit museums and galleries, when she can find time because she likes to see what other artists have done."⁴⁶ Plausibly, Sobel became more interested in the people and events of the art world once she began to show her own work.



Fig. 5. Janet Sobel, *Untitled* (c. 1946), crayon, ink and pencil on paper, 10" x 12³/₄". Courtesy Gary Snyder Gallery, New York.

Among the other artists shown by Guggenheim, the youngest was Charles Seliger, who still remembers Sobel, to whom he once gave one of his drawings: "She was a kind of shrewd naive; she had street sense, but was naive basically."⁴⁷ Recently Sobel's son gave Seliger back his drawing, on which his mother had added her own drawing. To her eye, no surface seemed inhospitable to her art—from box tops to letters to the covers of other artists' exhibition catalogues.

Guggenheim also encouraged Sobel to participate in a show called "A Painting Prophecy, 1950," being organized by her friend, the artist and dealer David Porter, at his gallery in Washington, D.C.⁴⁸ Sobel sent *Milky Way* to the exhibition, which took place in early 1945. Several months later Porter wrote to Sobel while the show was on to indicate that her work was "bringing forth some interesting comments." He also invited her to send work for another exhibition, "The Women," which he planned to tour several universities. He noted that this show would "represent the growing importance of the contribution which women are making to contemporary painting—a fact that should be given wider publicity than heretofore. This exhibit will show the creatively important ideas, expressions, and standards they are evolving and will indicate the influences they are exerting on esthetic values."⁴⁹

Another artist whom Sobel met at this time was her near-contemporary Marc Chagall, with whom she shared Russian culture and language and a love of music. When Sol took her to visit Chagall in his studio, he recalls that the two spoke Russian together (rather than Yiddish, another language that they had in common). Chagall had only landed in New York on June 23, 1941, the very same day the Nazis invaded Russia. During the seven years he remained in the United States, he never tried to learn English, provoking one biographer to quip: "The longer he stayed in America, the more Russian he became."⁵⁰ At the time of their meeting, both Chagall and Sobel were preoccupied by accounts of the war raging on the Eastern Front, the land of their youth, and both were feeling profoundly Jewish.⁵¹ Chagall's memories of his native Vitebsk included his uncle teaching him to play the violin, and, as a result, he liked to listen to music all day long while he worked.⁵² This habit was not so different from Sobel's who commented: "I always read books, the Russians and the English, and I love music.... I don't think that ever I would paint a picture without music to listen to. All humans must have something like that, that warms them inside."⁵³

Among the distinguished people who responded to Sol's letters about his mother was the philosopher and educator John Dewey, who had once formed a close bond with Anzia Yezierska, the Jewish immigrant novelist and short story writer who depicted immigrant life.⁵⁴ The experience with Yezierska might well have prepared Dewey to empathize with Sobel's ambitious canvas, *Chronicle of Our Elders*, where she referred to both Christ and Moses in a vertical composition crowded with figures and faces in a kind of horror vacui. She told an interviewer that the canvas was "the story of the persecution of great men who have declared themselves to truth." At a more mundane level, too, Dewey was aware of Jewish customs; for the same interviewer noted that when Dewey visited Sobel's Brighton Beach home to admire and talk about her paintings, "he stayed to consume her gefullte [sic] fish."⁵⁵

For Dewey, the philosopher of self-realization, Sobel, the self-taught artist, may have represented someone who had become the master of her own destiny. The two first met in 1941, at his Key West, Florida, home, after which Dewey decided to champion her. He wrote in the catalogue essay for her 1944 show at the Puma Gallery:

Her work is extraordinarily free from...self-consciousness and pretense. One can believe that to an unusual degree her forms and colors well up from a subconscious that is richly stored with sensitive impressions received directly from contact with nature, impressions which have been reorganized in figures in which color and form are happily wed.... The work of Mrs. Sobel would be of great interest even if only because she commenced painting, with no previous set instruction, after she had reached a fairly advanced age; but what is more striking is its unions of youthful spontaneity and a certain characteristic individualized finish.⁵⁶

Sobel's stylistic sources and pictorial subjects are interwoven with personal and cultural implications. Her work hints at psychic disturbance: her adolescence was interrupted twice, first by the violent death of her father and again by her family's narrow escape to the U.S. Following such traumas, she took refuge in marriage and child rearing, until the shocks of virulent anti-Semitism and impending war opened old wounds, rekindled old fears, and intensified her sense of her identity as a Jew of the Diaspora. It remains for us to decode the images through which she expressed her own suffering and the anguish of the time in which she lived.

The subjects of some of Sobel's pictures are quite legible, although others remain more elusive. But what does seem obvious is that for her the call to art implied a return in both style and content to the shtetl of her youth. Her palette, which is almost always brightly colored, and her fascination with patterns, ornament, and compositions without empty space (which suggest the horror vacui that is typical of many outsider artists) recall Ukrainian folk art. This was corroborated by one of my students, Mariya Tarassishina, a recent immigrant from the Ukraine, when we viewed Sobel's art at Gary Snyder Fine Art in February 2003.

The student became very excited, exclaiming at the specific references to folk customs that she immediately recognized: a number of Sobel's female figures wear *vinok z kvitiv* or wreaths of flowers worn by girls or unmarried women in the Ukraine (for example, in *Disappointment*). Young women and girls sometimes wore *strichky*, or ribbons, either alone or with flowers. Other female figures wear *hystka*, the scarf or shawl characteristic of married women (for example, both women in *The Advisor* of 1943).⁵⁷ In addition, my own research has shown that Ukrainian folk art frequently features floral motifs similar to those that often fill Sobel's pictures. Blossoms were commonly embroidered on garments and even painted on stoves. Jewish girls often learned to sew, knit, or embroider in order to contribute to the family income. Some produced floral embroidery on overblouses to sell to the peasants. Such floral patterns also appear on Jewish ritual objects produced in the Ukraine during the late-19th and early-20th centuries.⁵⁸

In addition to folk motifs, Sobel also incorporated Jewish ethnic and religious elements as well as contemporary themes. Her 1944 solo show at the Puma Gallery featured at least two pictures with biblical titles, *The Burning Bush* and *Prophet*, while *Creation* was the title of a painting in her January 1946 show at Art of This Century, which also included works that reflected her preoccupation with the war: *The Widow*, *Invasion Day*, and *The End of the Blackout*. *Hiroshima* combined religious and contemporary motifs. As one reviewer described it: "The mushroom cloud of the bomb explosion rises in the foreground, surrounded by devastation.... In the topmost part of the painting, the face of God the father is seen."⁵⁹

Sobel was constantly aware of the plight of the Jews during the war. She drew on letters soliciting funds from such organizations as the American League for a Free Palestine. The text on the ver-

so of her sketch speaks of “Three million casualties—ignored. Tens of thousands died in battle—not worthy of consideration. Two million survivors, hungry, desperate, homeless—no word of hope for them.”⁶⁰

Sometimes when Sobel depicted soldiers with cannons (c. 1941; Fig. 4), her images resemble not so much contemporary soldiers as the Czar’s imperial army that had caused terror during her childhood. Such evocations of that period recall her images elsewhere of bearded males dressed in black and women wearing colorful folk patterns and head coverings, which evoke the orthodox Jewish population of her childhood in the shtetl.

In one untitled work (c. 1943; Pl. 8), at least six bearded figures, some of whose garments suggest rabbis, are tightly interwoven with many other haunting figures and faces, some of which are placed in a different orientation. Female nudes, some holding children, one reminiscent of the figure on the left side of Picasso’s *Guernica*, are sprawled on the left of the composition, summoning up images of pogrom victims. Sobel could have seen Picasso’s *Guernica* when it was exhibited with 60 related studies in May 1939 in New York at the Valentine Gallery for the benefit of the Spanish Refugee Relief Campaign. Even if Sobel did not visit the gallery, the painting was widely reproduced. In reliving the tragic experiences of her youth through art, Sobel reflects the Jewish literary response to catastrophe in the fiction of the Yiddish writer S. Y. Abramovitsh and others.⁶¹

A final twist in Sobel’s fate resulted from circumstances that on the surface might seem positive. Business success and expansion motivated her husband to open a new factory for their costume jewelry manufacturing business in Perth Amboy, New Jersey. They sold the house in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, and moved in 1946, along with their five children and numerous grandchildren to a large house located on ten acres in Plainfield. This allowed the men to be closer to their workplace, but Janet Sobel, who, like many women of her generation, had not learned to drive, was now farther from New York and the art world. At the same time, she was surrounded by the distractions of her grandchildren and the demands of managing a large household. Her husband and four sons were preoccupied with the expanding business. Even Sol, despite his interest in promoting his mother’s art, became too busy with his own work and children to invest more time in her career. Although Greenberg claimed in 1955 that Sobel was still “a housewife living in Brooklyn,” she had long since relocated and her forwarding address might well have been unknown.

Whether Sobel agreed with the move to New Jersey or not, she was separated from almost everything and everyone that had previously served to support her art making: other artists, dealers and galleries, museums, and even the live musical performances that inspired her. Nevertheless, Sobel continued to make art. It is difficult to determine the chronology and dates of what she produced in her last years, since she almost never showed her work and kept no records. Because she spoke to a reporter in late 1946 about her allergy “to something in the paint she uses,” we can assign her crayon drawings to this later period. One example of an untitled crayon, ink, and pencil drawing (c. 1946; Fig. 5) shows two strange intertwined figures, both with scarlike forms across their faces and obsessively patterned limbs. Noting the compulsive nature of her art making, the reporter explained that Sobel “has not been able to find out what it is [in paint] that bothers her. It’s a serious drawback, particularly because she cannot leave paint alone, even when she tries.”⁶² She appears, however, to have worked with whatever alternative materials were easily available to her, especially crayons.

Sobel’s isolation in New Jersey, her gender, and her allergies to paint all contributed to her subsequent obscurity. Except for Greenberg’s brief citation, Janet Sobel was for a time completely forgotten by the New York art world. Her recent rediscovery only heightens our sense that she is one of the enigmas of modern art. ●

NOTES

1. Sobel’s work was featured in “Recent Acquisitions: Painting and Sculpture,” at the Museum of Modern Art, June 13-September 13, 1970. I thank Gary Snyder for his encouragement and his generous assistance with my research. I also thank Sol and Leah Sobel for their invaluable help, including making their collection of press clippings available. All letters to Janet Sobel come from their collection.
2. Clement Greenberg, “American-Type Painting,” reprinted in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 218. It is not clear precisely which paintings Greenberg was recalling. Although there is no catalogue raisonné of her work, Sobel’s dealer, Gary Snyder, estimates that she did about 30 all-over paintings.
3. William S. Rubin, “Jackson Pollock and the Modern Tradition, Part III: Cubism and the Later Evolution of the All-Over Style,” *Artforum* (April 1967), 18-31.
4. Judith S. Kays, “Mark Tobey and Jackson Pollock: Setting the Record Straight,” in *Mark Tobey* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 1997), 91-114.
5. Peter Busa to Melvin P. Lader, May 26, 1976; quoted in *ibid.*, 102.
6. Untitled clipping, review of Sobel’s show at the Puma Gallery, *Brooklyn Eagle*, April 25, 1944. Among the known figurative works on the checklist are (1) *Spring Festival* and (13) *Disappointment*.
7. Emily Genauer, “Janet Sobel’s Work,” *New York World-Telegram*, April 29, 1944.
8. Sidney Janis, *Abstract & Surrealist Art in America* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1944), 96, 113, 55.
9. *Ibid.*, 87, 96-97.
10. See checklist for “Paintings by Janet Sobel,” *Art of This Century* (January 2-16, 1946).
11. Clement Greenberg to Sol Sobel, postcard, March 16, 1971, Collection of Sol Sobel.
12. Emily Genauer, “Gasparo Has a Surprise or Two,” *New York World-Telegram*, September 23, 1944, 9; “A Symphony on Canvas,” *Brooklyn Eagle*, April 25, 1944.
13. “Bless Them,” *Art Digest* (July 1, 1945).
14. The catalogue is reproduced in the appendix of Angelica Zander Rudinstine, *Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice* (New York: Abrams, 1985), 786. See also Edward Alden Jewell, untitled clipping from *New York Times*, January 6, 1946.
15. Ad Reinhardt, “How to Look at Modern Art in America,” *PM* magazine (June 6, 1946).
16. Transcript of interview with Bill Leonard, “This is New York,” WCBS radio, December 16, 1946.
17. “Recent Acquisitions: Paintings & Sculpture,” MoMA, New York, June 13-September 13, 1970. Sobel’s work had last been shown in “A Painting Prophecy” at the David Porter Gallery, Washington, D.C. in 1950, and in “Janet Sobel Paintings and Drawings,” at Swain’s Art Store near her home in Plainfield, N.J., March 11-23, 1962.
18. Charlotte Streifer Rubinstein, *American Women Artists* (New York: Avon, 1982), 268, 461.
19. Elizabeth Frank, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Abbeville, 1983), 66.
20. Jeffrey Wechsler, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Dimensions* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University, 1990), 56, fig. #41; 86, fig. #61; 102-03, fig. #85; 116, fig. #103.
21. Ann Eden Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale University, 1997), 22-23, 124-25.

22. See *Inside Out: Selected Works by Janet Sobel*, Gary Snyder Fine Art, New York, N.Y., February 1-March 22, 2003, with catalogue essay by Gail Levin. The earlier show was "Janet Sobel: Selected Works from the Artist's Estate," January 5-March 9, 2002.
23. Roberta Smith, "Janet Sobel," *New York Times*, February 15, 2002.
24. See Deborah A. Goldberg, "Janet Sobel," in John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes, eds., *American National Biography XX* (New York: Oxford University, 1999), 351-53. She became known as Janet Wilson after she passed through Ellis Island. See also Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism*, 186, who gives the Ukrainian spelling of Sobel's family name as "Llyzhowsky." Her marriage certificate, however, lists her as "Jennie Wilson," and her mother-in-law as "Ida Lechovsky." Her son Sol recalls hearing that the immigration service at Ellis Island assigned his mother's family the name "Wilson." But if it was Lechovsky, it is possible that Janet's father was related to her husband's family, as cousins often married in shtetl life.
25. Author's interview with Sol Sobel, December 30, 2002. Subsequent references to Sol Sobel are from this interview unless noted otherwise.
26. *Der Tag*, 1944, undated clipping, translated from the Yiddish by Elaine S. Mann.
27. See Susan A. Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1990), 25. Erich Haberer, *Jews and Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Russia* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University, 1995), 246-47. A group of workers with a highly developed "revolutionary consciousness" had been developing in Ekaterinoslav since 1884.
28. Bernard was born in 1911 and died in 1990; Lillian was born in 1914; Stanley, born in 1917, died in 2002; Sol was born in 1920; and Herbert, born in 1927, died in 2000.
29. See *Brooklyn Eagle*, untitled clipping of April 25, 1944, with photo captioned "A Symphony on Canvas." The clipping reads: "Mrs. Sobel, mother of five children and grandmother of four, began painting five years ago when her son, Sol, gave up his scholarship at the Art Students League and said he was 'through with art.'" See also Emily Cheney, "Only Human," *Daily Mirror*, May 10, 1944, which states: "Finally her son, Sol, who was the artist of the family, caught her painting.... He took some of his mother's work to his old art teachers.... That was five years ago."
30. *Brooklyn Eagle* clipping.
31. Wayland Gregory, "Plainfield's Primitive Painter," *The Courier News*, January 6, 1962. The age of 49 seems inaccurate since elsewhere she says that she began painting in 1939, when she would have been either 44 or 45.
32. Cheney, "Only Human."
33. Sidney Janis, *They Taught Themselves: American Primitive Painters of the 20th Century* (New York: Dial Press, 1942).
34. Sidney Janis to Janet Sobel, October 26, 1942.
35. Harry Stone to Sidney Janis, letter of February 3, 1943; Sidney Janis to Sol Sobel, letter of March 1, 1943; Sidney Janis to Janet Sobel, undated postcard.
36. Fernando Puma, *Modern Art Looks Ahead* (New York: Beechhurst Press, 1947), 15, 16.
37. Henry McBride, "Janet Sobel," *New York Sun*, review of Puma Gallery Show, 1944.
38. Emily Genauer, "Janet Sobel's Work," *New York World-Telegram*, April 29, 1944.
39. "Janet Sobel," *Art News* (May 1, 1944), 20.
40. J.G., "Meet Janet Sobel," *Art Digest* (May 1, 1944), 7.
41. Carlyle Burrows, "Art of the Week: Janet Sobel," *New York Herald*, April 21, 1944.
42. Puma, *Modern Art*, 22.
43. Peggy Guggenheim, *Out of This Century: Confessions of an Art Addict* (1946; repr., New York: Universe Books, 1979), 279.
44. Sidney Janis, *Paintings of Janet Sobel* (New York: Art of This Century), January 2-19, 1946, brochure.
45. *Ibid.*, n.p.
46. "Critics Acclaim Boro Grandmother as Top Flight Surrealist Painter," *Brooklyn Eagle*, November 10, 1946, 12.
47. Charles Seliger to the author, January 2, 2003.
48. Peggy Guggenheim to Janet Sobel, December 7, 1944.
49. David Porter to Janet Sobel, February 22, 1945. Porter, telephone conversation of December 10, 2003, confirmed that this show actually did take place at his Washington, D.C. gallery in June 1945. Its earlier venues were Western College, Oxford, Ohio (March 1945) and Mary Baldwin College, Staunton, Va. (May 1945).
50. Sidney Alexander, *Marc Chagall* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1978), 331.
51. *Ibid.*, 349, for Chagall's feelings on being Jewish during the war.
52. *Ibid.*, 379.
53. Cheney, "Only Human."
54. See Mary V. Dearborn, *Love in the Promised Land: The Story of Anzia Yezierska and John Dewey* (New York: Free Press, 1988).
55. Transcript of Leonard Interview.
56. John Dewey, *Janet Sobel*, Puma Gallery, New York (April 24-May 14, 1944).
57. I thank Mariya Tarassishina for this information.
58. Tetyana Romanovskaya, "Shalom! Precious Collection of Judaica Ritual Objects in Ukraine," in *Welcome to Ukraine Magazine* (Kyiv, Ukraine, 1997), 34, reproduces examples from the Judaica Collection of the Museum of Historical Treasures of Ukraine. Floral motifs were especially common in Judaica produced in Odessa.
59. Joan Shearcko, "Plainfield Artist Exhibits 'Challenging' Paintings," unidentified clipping of review of 1962 show.
60. American League for a Free Palestine, Inc., New York, letter of March 9, 1945. Sobel's sketches of four figures are on the verso.
61. See David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University, 1984, 1999), 63-76.
62. "Critics Acclaim Boro Grandmother."

Gail Levin is Professor of Art History at Baruch College and The Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Her biography of Judy Chicago is forthcoming.

GRANDMOTHERS *love* W A J

JANET SOBEL



Pl. 5. Janet Sobel, *Music* (1944), oil on canvas, 24" x 17½". Location unknown. Photo: Sidney Janis, *Abstract & Surrealist Art in America* (1944).



Pl. 6. Janet Sobel, *Disappointment* (c. 1943), oil and sand on canvas, 26" x 43". Courtesy Gary Snyder Gallery, New York.



Pl. 7. Janet Sobel, *Pro & Contre* (1941), oil on board, 30" x 20". Courtesy Gary Snyder Gallery, New York.



Pl. 8. Janet Sobel, *Untitled* (c. 1943), mixed media on paper, 19" x 27".
Courtesy Gary Snyder Gallery, New