

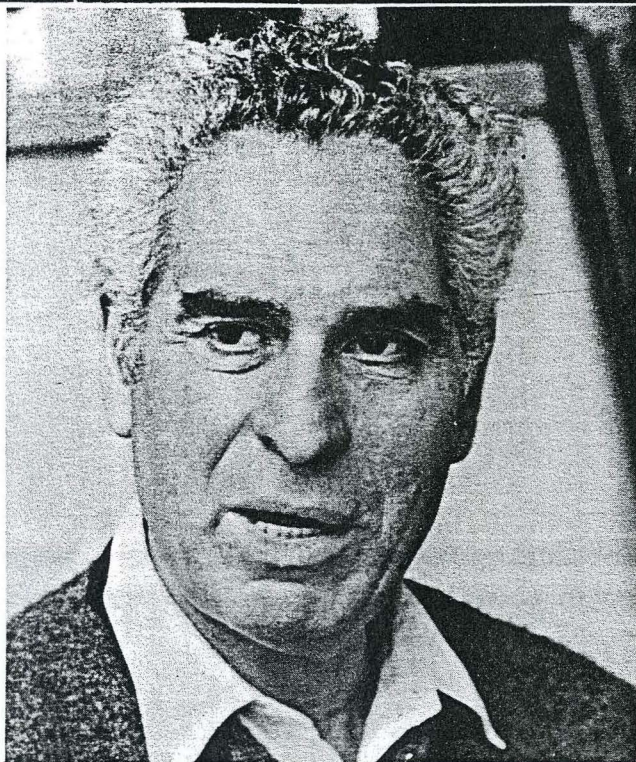
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Page seven



Now on view at the Provincetown Art Association during the Golden Anniversary Exhibition is "Praying Girl" by Chaim Gross. This piece of sculpture, executed in lignum vitæ in 1947, was lent by Mr. and Mrs. David Teichman of South Truro and New York.



Chaim Gross

"My love of wood reaches back to my childhood," Chaim Gross has said. He was born near a little village in the forests of the Carpathian Mountains, where lumbering was the main occupation. This was in Galicia, then the extreme northeastern province of Austria-Hungary, and now part of the Russian Ukraine. His parents were poor, hardworking, devout Jews, followers of the fervent Chassidic movement prevalent in Eastern Europe. "I was brought up to rejoice in God and life and to have a festive spirit," he says. His people were not then subject to persecution in Austria, and lived on good terms with their Christian neighbors. Born on March 17, 1904, Chaim was the youngest of ten children, of whom only five were surviving at his birth. Like most of the community, his father worked for a lumber company. "I endlessly watched the processes of lumbering," Gross recalls. "How I enjoyed the delicious, pungent smell of newly cut wood. Every evening after the day's work our household was a busy one with the peasants carving religious ornaments, household objects and utensils . . . Summer days meant happy times in the surrounding forests or watching the magic circus that came to town once a year. The colorful circus decorations and performances of the acrobats made so deep an impression that it later greatly influenced my work." To this outdoor childhood Gross probably owes the

physical strength and health that are basic in his character and work. His few contacts with art were the illustrations in the family's religious books, which he copied, and the example of his older brothers Pinkas and Naftoli, who drew and carved and wrote: the latter was to become a leading Jewish writer and poet in America.

Sculptors' studios are always picturesque, but that of Chaim Gross, with its junglelike accumulation of figures in wood, stone and bronze, and its walls covered with prints and drawings by his friends, is one of the most photogenic in New York. This photogenic quality is enhanced by Gross himself, with his strong face, dark sympathetic eyes, warm ruddy complexion, curly black hair now somewhat grayed, and the feeling that he gives of simple physical vitality and health. He and his wife are warm-hearted and sociable, and have many friends. In 1943, after he won the second prize of \$3,000 at the Artists for Victory exhibition, they bought a house on West 105th Street just off Central Park; where they have lived ever since. Their home is a small museum, filled with African sculptures and with pictures by painter friends, mostly acquired by exchange and chosen with an artist's eye for quality. Every summer since 1944 has been spent in Provincetown, where they own a house remodelled from a barn. Gross' first trip abroad since coming to America was in 1949, when he visited Israel; he has been there again in 1951 and in 1957. On the way there and back he has seen London, Paris, the Italian cities, Holland and Belgium, and last time spent ten weeks working in Rome.

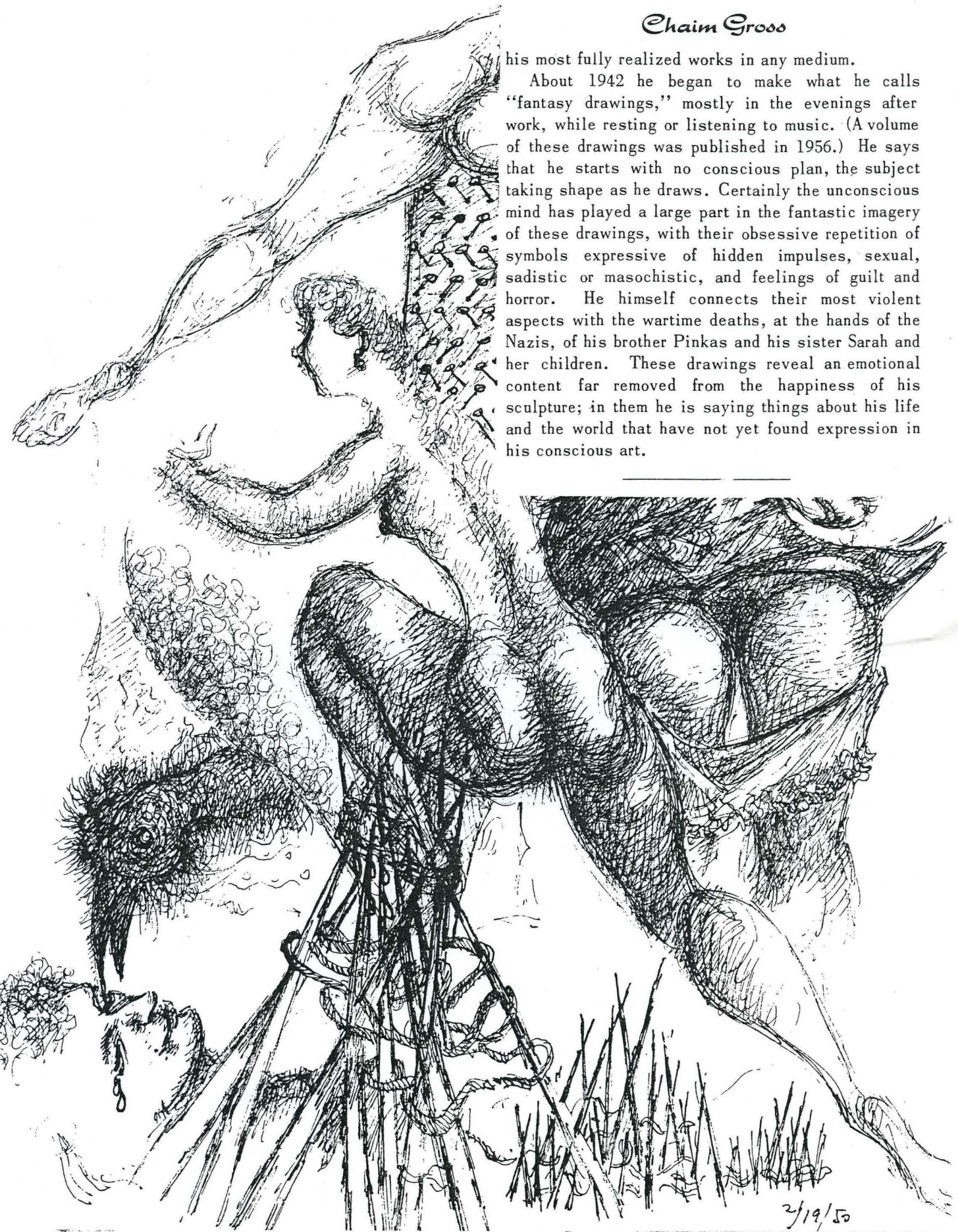
Gross has always drawn constantly — from nature, from the model, from memory and imagination. He still draws regularly from the nude. Literally scores of sketchbooks and hundreds of larger drawings attest this inexhaustible urge. Even when his drawings are connected with the development of a sculptural idea, they are works of art in themselves, showing a graphic gift and a deftness in the use of line and washes quite different from the usual sculptor's studies. Their grasp of the figure and of action reveals the knowledge that underlies his sculpture.

To him the watercolor medium is as important in its way as sculpture. He has always painted watercolors, mostly in summer and from nature. His landscapes and his Provincetown scenes have the graphic vitality of his drawings, and his recent large watercolors of Israeli subjects, especially of Chassidic rituals among the Yemenites, are among

Chaim Gross

his most fully realized works in any medium.

About 1942 he began to make what he calls "fantasy drawings," mostly in the evenings after work, while resting or listening to music. (A volume of these drawings was published in 1956.) He says that he starts with no conscious plan, the subject taking shape as he draws. Certainly the unconscious mind has played a large part in the fantastic imagery of these drawings, with their obsessive repetition of symbols expressive of hidden impulses, sexual, sadistic or masochistic, and feelings of guilt and horror. He himself connects their most violent aspects with the wartime deaths, at the hands of the Nazis, of his brother Pinkas and his sister Sarah and her children. These drawings reveal an emotional content far removed from the happiness of his sculpture; in them he is saying things about his life and the world that have not yet found expression in his conscious art.



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Unique Work Depicts Jewish Heritage

Chaim Gross of 36 Franklin Street, artist, sculptor and carver in wood and stone, has recently completed a portfolio of original color lithographs entitled "The Jewish Holidays," capturing the spirit and feeling of the Jewish religious heritage.

Mr. Gross had been at work for more than five years on the drawings and watercolors for the suite of lithographs. Completing the final studies in May, 1968, he went to Paris to execute the complex lithographs, choosing as printers, Georges Trotignon and Lucien Detruit, master craftsmen.

More than 75 stones and plates had to be drawn personally by the artist since each color in each print required a separate stone or plate. More than 19,000 impressions had to be pulled for the limited edition of 250 suites.

Mr. Gross' unique achievement in printmaking, the first ever to be done on the holiday theme, is also the artist's first portfolio of original color lithographs. The Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris has acquired two suites for their permanent collection. Many will go into the hands of private collectors, synagogues and museums.

Coming at 17 to the United States in 1921 from Eastern Europe, penniless but possessed of obvious talent, the young artist was encouraged to develop them at the art schools available to him in New York City. In 1927 he began a long teaching career at the Educational Alliance where he still gives his time today. For 20 years he has been teaching at the New School for Social Research, New York.

In 1937 he won a national sculpture prize of \$3,000 under the Art Program of the U.S. Treasury Department and received the Silver Medal the same year at the Paris Exposition. In 1942 he was awarded the second prize for sculpture at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He has also been the recipient of prizes at the Boston Arts Festival, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and received the National Institute of Arts and Letters Grant.

The Whitney Museum of American Art held a one-man exhibition of his work in 1959. In 1963 he received a significant honor in American art, the Arts and Letters Award from the Academy of Arts and Letters. The honor is given once every five years to the American judged to have made the most important contribution to American arts and culture. In 1964 he was made a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

His works are in the permanent collections of many museums and universities as well as in notable public and private collections.

"The Jewish Holidays" capture the joy and pathos of the Jewish high holy days. The author, Rabbi Avraham Seltes, has written the accompanying text. The work is sponsored by the Associated Ameri-

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PROVINCETOWN HERITAGE MUSEUM
"TOURISTS"
Bronze Sculpture
by
Chaim Gross

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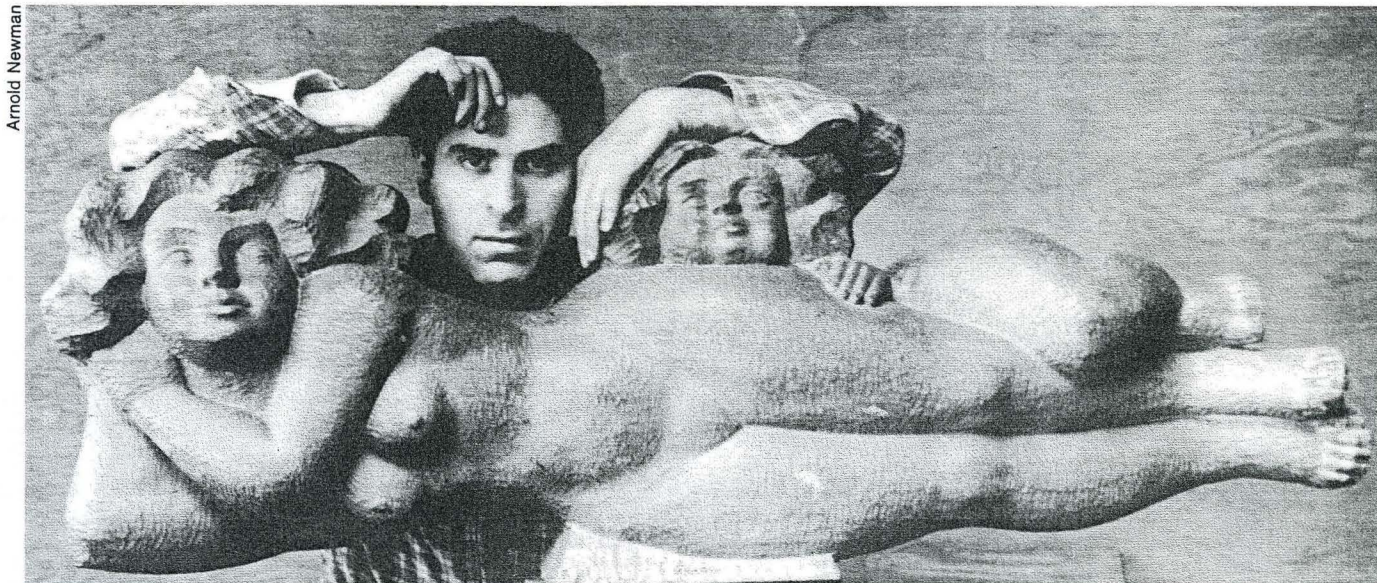
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CHAIM GROSS' STATUE OF TOURISTS • PROVINCETOWN

Remembering Chaim Gross

1904 - 1991



Arnold Newman

ALLEN GINSBERG:

On his 70th birthday Chaim Gross told *New York Times* reporter Israel Shenker, "Art gives me great happiness." Persistent happiness and its transmutation to art, his abiding bequest. Youngest of 10 children with half his family wiped out in diphtheria epidemic, he witnessed firsthand Cossacks abusing his parents, and aged 12 was impressed by the Austro-Hungarian army into picking up the battlefield dead. Chaim's early life catalogued misfortunes of Eastern Europe, volatile then as today. Deported from Hungary to Austria, then Austria to Poland. The son of a timber appraiser, following his father to the timber yards in remote Galicia in the forests of the Carpathian Mountains, he grew up watching the local peasant families whittling figures in wood, so it's natural that he would develop a particular affinity for direct wood carving.

After arrival in America with a wave of brother and sister immigrants he suffered years of extraordinary poverty, first doing a variety of odd jobs (delivery boy, floor cleaner, dish washer) to support his art, sometimes in the late '20s and early '30s living entirely hand

Continued on next page

RENEE GROSS:

In 1924, together with Moses Soyer, Chaim hitchhiked to Provincetown. They lived on 10 cents a day, a quarter a night with free breakfast. Commercial Street had no sidewalks, and fish hung outside to dry. After three days, left with 10 cents, they met Getler Smith on Commercial Street, who had no money to buy a newspaper. Moses gave him the last dime and they went without dinner. Moses called his father in New York and he sent five dollars for their return to New York.

In 1927 Chaim returned with Raphael and Moses Soyer. They went to Charles Hawthorne's painting class and slept on the dunes.

In 1939 Chaim and I and our son Yehudah stayed at John Hall's home on Boundbrook Island in Wellfleet for the summer. In 1943 the family visited Provincetown and stayed every summer since. We liked the Cape so much, we never wanted to go anywhere else. We found Provincetown the most beautiful place on the east coast.

We stayed in Jesse Meads' cottage on Atwood Avenue for many years. The rent was low. Everyday we went to the beach or blue

Continued on page 122

CHAIM POTOK:

I remember a tall man with an astonishing shock of thick hair; a man solid as a tree—I recall thinking the first time we met—his hair like a twining of leaves and branches above sharp, alert eyes. A full, firm mouth; a strong chin; a soft, gentle voice. We met that first time about a book for which he was preparing drawings—one of the prophetic books of the Bible that was soon to be published in a new English translation by the Jewish Publication Society of which I was then the editor. Entering his studio, I felt awed and overwhelmed by the sculptures: acrobats, dancers, faces, birds. Small sculptures, huge sculptures. Sculptures everywhere. And tools. And the smell of wood and stone. And the sense of being in a birthing area for a special sort of life: the life given to inanimate and waiting wood and stone by the artist.

His own life as well was shaped, actually and metaphorically, by the tools of sculpture.

Chaim Gross—his name means large life—once published a little book entitled *Sculpture in Progress*. It is a step-by-step account of the coming-to-life of a plaster sculpture later cast

Continued on page 123



Chaim Gross in his studio, 63 East 9th Street, New York, 1938

Photo: Eliot Elisofon

ALLEN GINSBERG Cont. from previous page to mouth. When the apple and pear were missing from the still-life class at the Educational Alliance, home-away-from-home, friends assumed that Chaim must've eaten them. More bittersweet circumstance, the sale of two watercolors and one sculpture, his first sale in the early '30s. Disheartened, he left town with a note ("Goodbye boys"), assumed to be a suicide missive. The sale took place in the interim. Ninety dollars! Imagine the surprise when the artist "came back from the dead!"

"Don't wait till the muse wakes you up at night and says do this and that. Make a point of working all the time," he advised his students. "I'm a sculptor not a painter but I'm one of those sculptors who knows how to draw and how to paint," was his own clear self-appraisal. Chaim's articulate understanding of his own processes made him a sympathetic consummate teacher at the Alliance and the New School whose faculty he joined in '48. His book, *The Technique of Wood Sculpture* (1957), remains over 30 years after its publication a useful compendium and primer.

In earlier decades he enjoyed the company of his fellow artists—lifelong friends the Soyfer brothers (Isaac, Moses, and Raphael), Peter Blume, Barney Newman, Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, Ben Shahn, and Philip Evergood—thru significant years at the Alliance where he was first pupil, then teacher, even of Louise Nevelson, for almost seven decades. He was blessed with a fortunate marriage to wife Renee and fathered a remarkable daughter, painter Mimi Gross.

Recognition of his own work came slowly. His first one-man drawing and sculpture show

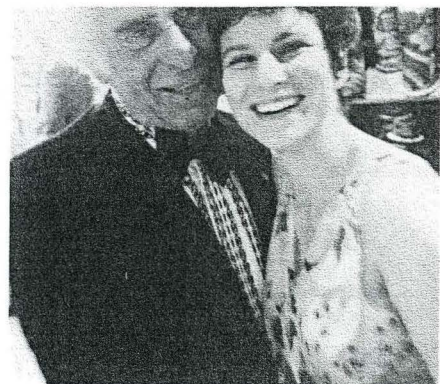
took place in 1932 at Manfred Schwarz's 144 Gallery on West 13th Street. Earlier he'd contributed to group shows at Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery (one of the first New York galleries to handle contemporary American art) but quit when he came in one day and discovered his sculpture used as a doorstop. The Depression '30s represented the breakthrough decade in Chaim's art, but didn't translate into sales or money. By 1942 he could still count on his fingers the number of sculptures he'd sold. No matter that the work was appearing in some significant collections: the Museum of Modern Art acquired his typically graceful and exuberant study in balance, "Handlebar Riders;" and in 1942, the Metropolitan Museum of Art awarded him a \$3000 purchase prize for his Lilian Leitzel, a similarly sensuous figure sculpture.

The celebration of the human figure was to be one of Chaim's most prominent themes. At the 1939 World's Fair he worked on a 14-foot-high family group for the French Pavilion, as well as the figure of a linesman for the Finland building. He was also on display himself, demonstrating his craft. He may not have sold many sculptures at this time but his singularity was assured, for even in the era of social realism, Chaim was thematically somewhat at odds. For all their apparent context, his figures, the daring acrobats, say, posited not so much a social program as a commitment to each other, the human quality, the interdependence of the human—his abiding theme. Similarly in the '50s and after when the emphasis shifted to the artist's individual subjective vision, Chaim's art stood unaffected, he was what he was.

Representative works like the 10-foot "Birds

of Peace," commissioned for Hebrew University in the late '50s and early '60s and "The Ten Commandments" (unveiled in 1972 at the International Synagogue at Kennedy Airport) show his command of an ambitious scale. But Chaim's drawings were the key to his art. An inveterate draughtsman throughout his life, from earliest days of exile to his last days here in New York, he filled countless sketchbooks and hundreds of sheets with accomplished pencil, pen and ink, and wash studies—on nature, studies of the human form, "fantasy drawings" (a collection of these appeared in book form under that title in 1956), unmediated examinations of his own psyche, dark in the early years and increasingly lyrical, erotic and surrealist in character as he finally revealed his own nature. A major retrospective of his work at the Jewish Museum in 1977 showed his astonishing versatility and fecundity, and in his remaining 14 years he kept on working.

Visitors to his house were always amazed at the richness and range of his own collection of others' work—an intelligence and energy of travel and socializing that went way beyond the quiet emotional white-haired man that I knew in the last few decades. At his house (once a hat factory), a good meal prepared by Renee—chicken soup, potato pancakes—was served at a table surrounded by authentic artifacts by Chagall, Evergood, Peter Blume, his favorite Federico Castellon, the Soyers, Jack Levine, Max Weber, David Burliuk, Max Ernst, Louis Guggenheim, George Grosz, Horace Pippin, Adolph Gottlieb, and Matta. Altogether a vast home collection, including small works by de Kooning, gouaches, drawings, lithos by Toulouse-Lautrec, Klee, Dufy, Maillol, John Marin, Orozco, Pascin, Stuart Davis—as well as a huge selection of West African sculpture, Ashanti gold weights, Oceanic and Pre-Columbian art. So he's now sitting drinking tea with old acquaintances Marc Chagall, Pablo Picasso, and the Soyfer Boys in heaven or whatever Shul their shades attend. ■



Chaim and Mimi

Photo by Bill Arnold

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Continued from page 121

RENEE GROSS:

berry picking. One day while picnicking on Blueberry Hill with my children, I admired the studio which belonged to George Elmer Browne. His paintings covered the windows. In spite of the fact that it was in bad condition, we acquired it the following year in 1950. Jesse Meads, our landlord, was also a great carpenter and plumber. He was really a self-trained architect. The building had been a barn at the foot of the hill which George Elmer Browne had moved to the top of the hill. Jesse Meads re-converted it.

Everyday, Chaim went on his bicycle to sketch and paint watercolors, to every street, every corner, every tree of Provincetown. One windy day on the town pier his watercolor and watercolor box fell in the high tide water. The painting washed away, but later at low tide he retrieved his watercolor box from under the pier.

For many years, until it was torn down, Chaim had a little sculpture studio on Higgins' Wharf. While doing his work he enjoyed knowing all the local fishermen. He would get very tan and the fishermen thought he was Portuguese like themselves. They would speak to him in Portuguese and he would act like he understood them. They considered it good luck to give him free fish.

Many of the artists in town were his dear friends. He attended all the openings—hundreds over the years. At Sam Kootz, Tirca Karlis, Nat Halper & Ivan Karp, Sun Gallery, East End or West End, Chaim was always there. He shared lively discussions with his friends and followed all the changes in the art world. He encouraged younger artists and debated with older characters. For many years he shared a space to draw from a model at Irving Marantz's studio, spending time together with Milton Avery and Byron Browne. Among his many friends who were artists in Provincetown, Chaim knew Peter Busa very well. He had bought some paintings from him and brought friends to buy his work, including Emil Arnold who made a colossal purchase of over 200 paintings at one time!

We had many cocktail parties. One particular party, Mr. and Mrs. Sonnenberg arrived. They admired a sculpture by Chaim carved in onyx. Among the guests for the first time was Larry Richmond. Larry followed Chaim to the kitchen and said, "I want to buy the onyx sculpture. It's mine!" Chaim was very pleased, but that made the Sonnenbergs very angry—they didn't speak up in time. Larry became our best friend in Provincetown. He bought work by almost every artist who lived and worked there. Later he became president of the Provincetown Art Association, donated his collection, and made it into a museum.

In the photos and snapshots and visual anecdotes of Chaim working and relaxing, playing chess or scrabble on the beach with his friends, there is the sun, the sand, and the sea which he loved. ■



Provincetown, 1949

Continued from page 121

CHAIM POTOK:

in bronze: two acrobats defying gravity in exquisite arabesques of fluid form. The first chapter of the book is called "The Foundation" and contains photographs of three objects: a wrench, a hammer, and a length of metal rod. Here is the metaphor that occurred to me as I looked at that book again last night.

A Cossack pogrom wrenched Chaim Gross from his European world when he was nine years old. His entire family fled—indeed, the entire town—including his 86-year old grandfather. After some years of wandering, Chaim arrived in New York, where he shaped and hammered the gift with which he had been born—he was a natural artist—hammered the gift into a life of art; adding on to the metal rod that was the firm core of his being; shaping the form and planes that made up the living sculpture, the tree I knew as Chaim Gross.

I remember walking with him through the streets of Provincetown and talking with him hour after hour about art and artists. He took me to the Portuguese section of the town; he took me to the pier where children dove into the deep water; he took me to the galleries. The story of Asher Lev was churning inside me at the time, and much of Chaim Gross's Provincetown world is in that novel. I went

Continued on page 124



Raphael Soyer painting portrait of Chaim and Renee Gross, Provincetown, 1982. Photo: Jonathan J. Halperin

CHAIM POTOK:

Continued from page 123

with him once to a town in Connecticut to help raise money for a school. I spoke about literature; he sculpted a head out of moist clay he had brought along in a pail. I remember watching the head come to life beneath his fast-moving fingers. How awed the audience was! People sat wide-eyed with wonder. How he loved teaching; this soft-voiced, gentle tree of a man.

That tree occupied solidly the house in which it dwelt: a space filled to near overflowing with the art of Chaim Gross and others—a temple of art. Always, when I visited him and Renee, I left with great reluctance. The memory of their house and their hospitality would linger as I made my way through the tumult of the streets. Stone and wood and plaster and bronze. Prints and paintings and drawings and watercolors. The magic of space transformed. The legacy of a man who worked with a wrench, a hammer, and a metal rod to give unique shape to himself and the world.

Again and again, each time I saw him he reminded me, in his build and bearing, of the strongest and sturdiest of trees. And now that tree has fallen. "If among the mighty cedar trees the flame of death can fall, what shall we who are as grass that grows from walls—

what shall we say?" We grieve and are diminished.

Chaim Gross, husband, father, grandfather, artist, teacher, friend—rest in peace. May the memory of the man, the artist, and his creations remain for all of us and for the generations to come a true blessing. ■

Chaim Potok delivered this eulogy at the Riverside Chapel, New York, May 7, 1991.