

## **"The Jewish Art of Rita Blitt"**

**By Bezalel Narkiss**

**Edited by Donna Stein**

Rita is movement. For me her recent art, minimal as it may be, is a swivel, taking you up and around -- a dance, elating and enchanting. The rhythm of her brush strokes seems almost traditional Japanese, but it is not conventional -- it is free and emotional. Her pictures are gripping. One could put any meaning into those strong black on white brush strokes.

When we first met, Rita, knowing of my interest in contemporary art of Jewish consciousness, asked me whether I saw anything Jewish in her work. I was puzzled, mainly since I was aware of only the latest period. I now know much more.

On my desk I have a cut-out gold dancing flame, which Rita created in 1987 to honor the Jewish Community Center of Greater Kansas City. The flame alludes to the Holocaust of the Jewish people, but also to the burning bush of Moses, which was not consumed -- like the people of Israel who survived. The flames suggest a stylized version of the Hebrew letter Shin, which may allude to Shadai, one of the names of God, in which he appeared to Moses.

Rita's mother taught her about the Holocaust and Israel. As a Hadassah regional president, she spoke day after day on the financial needs of different projects in Israel and their fear that they would not survive. This fear may have been expressed in Rita's *Struggle for Survival* (1976), a Plexiglas Star of David shaped in a dancing form but bound by barbed wire to halt its movement, now in the Los Angeles Skirball Museum collection. "I created this," says Rita, "when I was tying my sculptures with rope in painful response to hearing the United Nations equate Zionism with racism."

The Holocaust in Rita's art is remembered in her 1973 work *I Shall Never See Another Butterfly*. A book of children's paintings from the Teresin Ghetto, including a picture of the same title, stimulated Rita to create her own interpretation of the theme. Innocent children's faces with numbers painted over them, peeping through the barbed wire of a concentration camp, create a colorful image of a butterfly. This powerful painting superimposes the shape of the free butterfly onto the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust and the hope of innocent children.

The hope for Jewish life is again expressed in one of Rita's most impressive sculptures. Entering the Donor Recognition Room at the B'nai Yehudah Temple in Kansas City, one has to walk through this 10-foot-tall walnut sculpture. The shape forms two Hebrew letters, Het and Yod, which together make the word Hai, meaning life in Hebrew. Entering this sculpture activates a recording of the cello piece *Prayer for Jewish Life* by Ernst Bloch, performed by Yehudah Hanani. Music is an essential part of Rita's life and influences her work.

One of Rita's early realistic paintings, done in the late 1950s, depicts an old man singing the Kiddush. The white bearded man, covered with a prayer shawl, lifts his silver cup while reciting the benediction. A few years after her father's death, Rita realized that, unintentionally, she had painted the man to resemble her father.

The Star of David is no doubt one of the main images adapted by Rita to symbolize her identity with Judaism. This hexagonal star became the pride of Judaism when it was regarded as the official symbol of the Zionist movement by the end of the nineteenth century. The most impressive of Rita's stars is the one she created by tying together dry branches collected in the woods.

A brass sculpture, entitled *My Joyous Jewish Star*, was created to celebrate Irwin Blitt's involvement in establishing a campus, a gathering place of study, play, and work, for the Greater Kansas City Jewish Community. The title suggests Rita's happiness and pride in her husband's accomplishments. "However," adds Rita, "I saw in my spontaneous drawing from which the star was created, elements of both happiness and sadness -- so typical of the story of the Jewish people." The sculpture now hangs at the Jewish Community Center in suburban Kansas City.

In 1975, Rita expressed her relations with her birthplace when she created the Plexiglas sculpture of two flags stemming from one pole -- one is the United States flag, and the other represents the State of Israel. This juxtaposition of the two flags, both so dear to Rita, is titled *Not Dual Loyalty, but Extended Love*, words quoted from a speech by Gerda Klein.

Rita Blitt is quick to react, expressive in her imagination, and able to translate feelings, music, words, movements, and prayer into her art. She transforms simple objects into meaningful expressions.