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Mark Podwal: A Vision Vaster than Words

February 17, 2006

Episode no. 925

by Benedicta Cipolla

""Deep is the well of the past'," says author and illustrator Mark Podwal, quoting the opening line of Thomas Mann's novel JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS as he searches for words to describe the way his faith and his art intertwine. "The well of Judaism is very deep for inspiration," he explains.

Podwal's latest exhibition, at the Yeshiva University Museum in New York, gathers together 90 works that span most of his 35-year career. The show includes intricate drawings for his collaboration with Elie Wiesel on a book about the Golem, a clay creature given life, according to legend, by a 16th-century rabbi in Prague; whimsical paintings depicting Jewish holiday foods and culinary customs from his book A SWEET YEAR; a special Passover Seder plate designed for the Metropolitan Museum of Art; and op-ed illustrations for THE NEW YORK TIMES.

Throughout his career, Podwal, a nonobservant Jew who draws almost exclusively on Judaism in his art, has highlighted the cultural, historical, and political aspects of the religion -- traditions, folklore, European ghettos and shtetls -- and, in his op-ed work, the contemporary situation in the Middle East.

"I'm very proud to be Jewish, but when it comes to not eating this or not writing or not turning on the light switch, I can appreciate the people who follow those laws, but it would just really complicate my life," says Podwal, a doctor who runs a dermatology practice in addition to cultivating his artistic calling. "There are people who return to Judaism -- being Orthodox, leaving and then returning -- but very often they just become immersed in the laws. I look at Judaism as something that can offer me creativity."

Playful but clever, childlike but cerebral, his art offers inside winks at Jewish tradition and multiple layers of meaning that transcend the visual image itself, eliciting both smiles and piercingly moving reactions. A matzah moon hangs over a purple village, which makes for an appealing enough image until you realize that Passover falls during a full moon, and the painting about a flight to freedom suddenly takes on greater depth. Dreidels grow out of an olive branch, a reference to Hanukkah's celebration of a one-day supply of oil that miraculously lasted eight days. Prague's Jewish ghetto floats in a menorah above the rest of the city; because Jewish buildings were forbidden to be taller than Christian ones, Podwal decided to elevate the entire Jewish neighborhood. Hebrew letters snake into the sky from Prague's Altneuschul or Old-New Synagogue, Europe's oldest, representing prayers ascending to heaven.

In recent years, Prague has served as the special locus of Podwal's inspiration. Before he ever visited the city, he created intricate drawings for the Golem book with Wiesel, animated by legends from the city's Jewish quarter. Later, curators told him that the way he had captured the feel of the 16th-century ghetto was uncanny.

"Since then I really have developed many friends in the Jewish community in Prague," Podwal says. "It's like going into a time capsule." He is working with filmmaker Allan Miller on a documentary about Prague's old Jewish cemetery, early scenes of which can be found in the Yeshiva exhibition. In mid-February he is traveling to the Czech capital for the eighth time as part of his ongoing work with the Jewish Museum there. For a limited edition silkscreen print and poster to commemorate the museum's 100th anniversary, Podwal chose the Star of David as the basis for the design, since Prague was the first Jewish community to identify itself with the six-pointed shape. At each point of the star are four of the city's synagogues, the Prague tombstone of 16th-century Jewish scholar David Gans, and the Prague Jewish community's special flag. The painting is a riot of color, packed with symbols of what for centuries was arguably the world's most important center of Jewish culture.

When Michaela Hajkova, curator of visual arts at Prague's Jewish Museum, met Podwal on his first trip to the city in 1997, she was struck by his interest in visiting the Old-New Synagogue's attic, where legend says the Golem created by Rabbi Loew was buried. (In the legend, the 16th-century rabbi breathed life into a Golem or human figure of clay, whose power he then used, according to later writers, to defend the Jewish community against the evil intentions of its enemies.) When she saw Podwal's Golem drawings, she understood why. "Not that he would expect to find the man of mud resting there in peace, not that he would seek to unravel the mystery of Rabbi Loew's creation, nothing like that. I guess that all he wanted was to 'bring his own Jewish dream back home' by connecting its literary fiction with its material ground," she says. "This is what I very often see in Mark's drawings: a perfect match of a free spirit and a deep insight of the essence of things and their interconnectedness."

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Read a commentary by Cynthia Ozick on Mark Podwal entitled "[Art that Seizes the Stars and the Shtetl](#)"

Born in Brooklyn in 1945 to a nonobservant family and raised in Queens, Podwal didn't grow up steeped in the Judaism that would evolve into the underpinning of his art. A self-effacing man, Podwal credits his scholar and artist friends -- Wiesel, writer Cynthia Ozick, cartoonist Art Spiegelman -- with deepening his knowledge.

"I don't think I was in a synagogue until I was 12, at a cousin's bar mitzvah the year before mine. It meant nothing to me," he recalls. "And then when I was 12 I was sent to a Jewish camp, and every morning they said prayers and there were services." When he returned home, he insisted to his parents that he transfer to a school where he could learn Hebrew in time for his bar mitzvah. Later, he delved into books inherited from an uncle, sparking a lifelong passion for studying Judaism on his own.

"His work is not only creative and inventive," says Grace Cohen Grossman, senior curator for Judaica and Americana at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles, where Podwal has exhibited. "He also pays attention to the different 'midrashim,' the different interpretations that come from a lot of different sources. He avails himself of people who are scholars to give him background information, which makes his work even richer."

With no formal art training, Podwal returned to his childhood love of drawing while in medical school during the 1960s, and he published a book of political drawings in 1971. The book caught the eye of an art director at THE NEW YORK TIMES, and the following year his first op-ed illustration appeared, on the Munich Olympics massacre. Since then, his works have found their way into the collections of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and London's Victoria and Albert Museum. He has exhibited at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, Yale University, and New York's Jewish Museum; he designed a tapestry and Torah covers for a prominent New York synagogue; and he has illustrated dozens of books for children and adults, 10 of which he also wrote.

His 11th book for children and the first that incorporates interfaith themes, JERUSALEM SKY: STARS, CROSSES, AND CRESCENTS (Doubleday), appeared last year. Like Prague, the ancient city provides inspiration for Podwal, and after traveling there about a dozen times with his Israeli-born wife, he decided to finally channel that inspiration into words and pictures. Like many of his books, JERUSALEM SKY is centered on an overarching theme -- stories in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam relating to the city's sky. Accounts of King Solomon, Jesus, and Muhammad are featured, though no human is pictured. Podwal preferred to depict them symbolically.

The response has been enormous. Prompted by the book, the Anti-Defamation League organized an exhibition of artwork in Brooklyn last December by children from Jewish, Christian, and Muslim schools, and plans are under way to repeat the program in other cities. One of the most touching letters he received, Podwal says, came from a woman in North Carolina whose daughter's Methodist Sunday school class visited a synagogue after reading the book.

"When my publisher said, 'What do you envision with this book?' I said, 'Well, I'd love for it to be read at Sunday schools.' And that's happening."

Next on the horizon for Podwal are illuminations for YETZIAH, a book by the celebrated Yale literary critic Harold Bloom on fallen angels, demons, and devils, and he is also considering tackling the biblical books of Ecclesiastes and Ezekiel. After his mother died three years ago, he began rereading Ecclesiastes "because it's all about life and death," and he is eager to take a stab at visually translating the Hebrew prophet Ezekiel's visions and literary imagery.

Asked if he is a believer, Podwal demurs, but then, unbidden, returns to the question of belief and art a minute later. "I cannot say that I'm not a believer. I don't think I could do it if I didn't believe."

"Framed in Words: The Art of Mark Podwal" is at the Yeshiva University Museum through April 27, 2006

Benedicta Cipolla, a writer in New York City, has also reported for RELIGION & ETHICS NEWSWEEKLY on novelist [John Updike](#) and on the [ethics of torture](#).

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