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Review **Arts & Entertainment**

Review: Expressive range in this family of artists blooms at Maine Jewish Museum

Up through May 3, 'Father and Daughter' features the incredible bounty of Dahlov Ipcar and both of her parents, William and Marguerite Zorach.

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Jorge S. Arango

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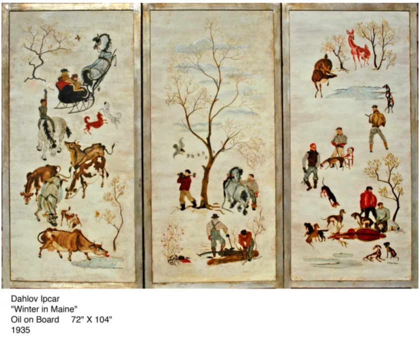


Dahlov Ipcar, "Winter in Maine," oil on board, 72" by 104," 1935 *Photo by Charles Ipcar/courtesy of Rachel Walls Fine Art*

When it comes to famous Maine artists, William and Marguerite Zorach and their daughter, Dahlov Ipcar, are like a Holy Trinity. The Zorachs were very well known, not just in this state, but as New York artists who were interviewed on live television in 1957 by none other than Edward R. Murrow. Ipcar was both the first woman and the youngest artist (at 21!) to be featured in a solo exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art.

So, it is a very special occasion indeed that "Father and Daughter: William Zorach and Dahlov Ipcar" has landed at the Maine Jewish Museum (through May 3). It arrives here by way

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Father and Daughter: William Zorach and Dahlov Ipcar"

Thrive with FINALSITE
GET STARTED

WHERE: Maine Jewish Museum, 267 Congress St., Portland

WHEN: Through May 3

HOURS: Noon to 4 p.m. Sunday, Monday, Thursday, Friday

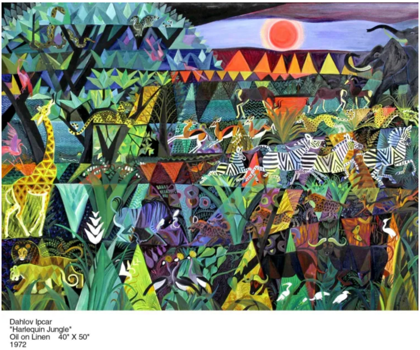
ADMISSION: Free

INFO: 207-773-2339, mainejewishmuseum.org

of guest curator Rachel Walls, who worked with the estates of William and Dahlov to make the show a reality. The name doesn't acknowledge, by the way, that there are two works by Marguerite to be enjoyed here as well.

Walls was in third grade when a visiting-artist program brought Ipcar into her classroom. Ipcar was both painter and children's book author and illustrator, and she became a consistent figure in Walls' life through the many readings she gave of her books. Walls' parents, who were art collectors, also owned work by the Zorachs and Ipcar.

What the curator has assembled are several fascinating Zorach bronzes and works Ipcar felt were the most important of her career. The latter were never for sale, and Walls wasn't able to secure borrowing all of them. Instead, we get a mixture of original works and giclée prints made, with Ipcar's children consent, from works they own but, for one reason or another, were reticent to lend. The giclée prints are for sale, as is the only freestanding piece in the Ipcar show, a hand-painted wood room screen called "Winter in Maine."



Dahlov Ipcar, "Harlequin Jungle," oil on linen, 40" by 50," 1972 *Photo by Charles Ipcar/courtesy of Rachel Walls Fine Art*

Also, in the gallery devoted to Ipcar is a video of the Edward R. Murrow interview with the Zorachs, which is well worth the watch not only for the dated perspective Murrow takes about "artists" (Marguerite at times seems mildly annoyed or, at the least, impatient), but because it features various works on view in the show. Among these are Marguerite's painting of Ipcar with her horse and several of William's sculptures.

Said sculptures were all made as his response to the Holocaust. The seven bronzes on view were carved and cast between the end of the 1940s and the mid-1950s. We are greeted by the colossal "Head of Moses" (1956), which establishes a powerful and somber presence for the other sculptures. It was originally carved from granite, which I would love to have seen. But then William cast six versions in bronze (one of which appears in the Murrow interview).

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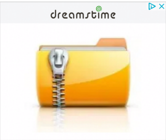

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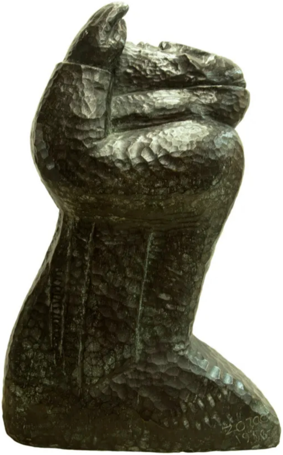
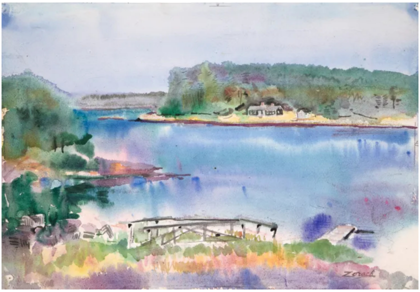


William Zorach, "The Prayer (I Will Lift Up My Eyes Unto the Mountains, Praying Man, The Prayer-Kneeling Figure)," 1955, bronze. Edition 1/8, 26 x 16 inches *Photo by Jim Castonia/courtesy of Rachel Walls Fine Art*

Despite its formidable size and aura, it is not my favorite out of the selection. That would be "The Prayer" because it exemplifies a reduction of form that characterized the sculpture of various artists of the era, among them Jacques Lipchitz and Louise Nevelson (before she began creating the constructions that would cement her fame). Many of this era's figural works were expressed through a blocky, cubist style that retains their legibility of form, but not at all in an academic way. I've always been fond of this period, and there's a way this approach lends power to the subject matter here. In "The Prayer" we get the feeling of the gesture in a way that is not literal, yet nevertheless manages to convey, through its reductive approach, only what is most important: the emotional weight of the figure's sadness and a beseeching that feels almost desperate.

Among these works is an astonishing bas relief plaque called "Battle of the Ghetto," which is remarkable for the degree of energy Zorach managed to cram into its 7.5-by-11.75-inch area. By compressing all this muscularity, pointing, fleeing, fighting and so on, within this modest size, the sense of chaos and terror feels palpable. Unlike the bas relief next to it, "Refugees," the "Ghetto" sculpture has more dimensionality because of a more heavily carved depth of field, adding to the intensity. "Refugees" is very minimally carved, its forms little more than outlines, which gives it a near flatness that just isn't as effective in conveying the immediacy of its companion bronze relief.

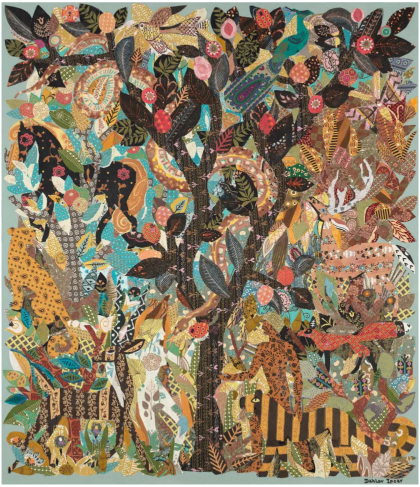


William Zorach, "Lowe's Point (Grey Day, Robinhood Cove)," 1953, watercolor, 15 x 22 inches *Photo by Jim Castonia/courtesy of Rachel Walls Fine Art*

A surprise of the William Zorach part of the show were his watercolors of Maine landscapes, of which I had not been aware. Pieces like "The Knubble" and "Lowe's Point (Grey Day, Robinhood Cove)" show a lyrical facility with this medium, and their softness and beauty go a long way toward relieving the serious theme of the sculptures. It is as if they represent a peace the Zorachs were able to experience here that, if incapable of revolving the horrors of the Holocaust for them, at least provided a respite.

Not everything in the Ipcar section of the show is – at least for me – as seminal as it might have been for her. Two portraits of her parents are not, I think, exceptional. Of the two, William's portrait seems more alive (especially his eyes, which seem to twinkle). That could be a function of the fact that she painted him in life, whereas the portrait of Marguerite was painted from an image of her that Ipcar referred to after her mother's death.

Marguerite's portrait of Ipcar, in turn, is similarly flat and a little hokey in its idealization of Ipcar as a kind of hair-blowing-in-the-wind Lady Godiva. Far more interesting is Marguerite's embroidery of "The Ipcar Family in Robinhood Farm" (1944), in which we can see where Ipcar inherited her connection to fiber as a pictorial medium.



Dahlov Ipcar, "Garden of Eden," 1961, cloth collage, 37 by 32 inches *Photo by Charles Ipcar/courtesy of Rachel Walls Fine Art*

There are two pieces that illustrate that connection. One is "Golden Jungle" of 1982, a 30-by-40-inch needlepoint; the other, a fabric collage from 1961 called "Garden of Eden," is worth the entire show. The sheer complexity of it is breathtaking, thousands of scraps of patterned cloth creating a scene that thrums with life and sensual delight.

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What is most amazing about both of these, and Marguerite's embroidery for that matter, is that they either presaged or ignored the feminist "women's work" movement of the 1970s, which reclaimed domestic crafts as art to make a political statement about patriarchy. Both women simply seem to have lived with a respect for art-making through whichever medium accomplished their goals. There was no hierarchy or discrimination between the two. Even after the movement, of which Ipcar was certainly aware, she produced "Golden Jungle" without the least note of irony.

"Garden of Eden," by Ipcar's own admission, changed the course of her art too. It is how she arrived at what she referred to as her style of "non-intellectual cubism," which manifested in the breaking up of the picture plane, most often into triangles defined by different colors. There are many such images here, reproduced as giclée prints: "Blue Moon Jungle," for instance, and "Luando Morning," which she considered the best painting she ever did.

In the Murrow interview, the host (smoking, always smoking) asks William Zorach the question most every artist dreads: What is art? Zorach's response is telling. "Art is love," he says, explaining that it's something the artist feels so intensely that "it has to be recorded for humanity." As the show makes clear, this notion resonated with all the members of this Holy Trinity and informed their lives.

Jorge S. Arango has written about art, design and architecture for over 35 years. He lives in Portland. He can be reached at: jorge@jsarango.com

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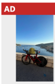

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