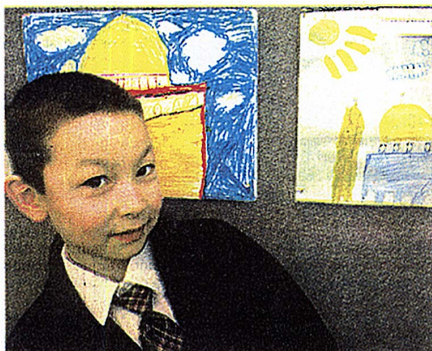
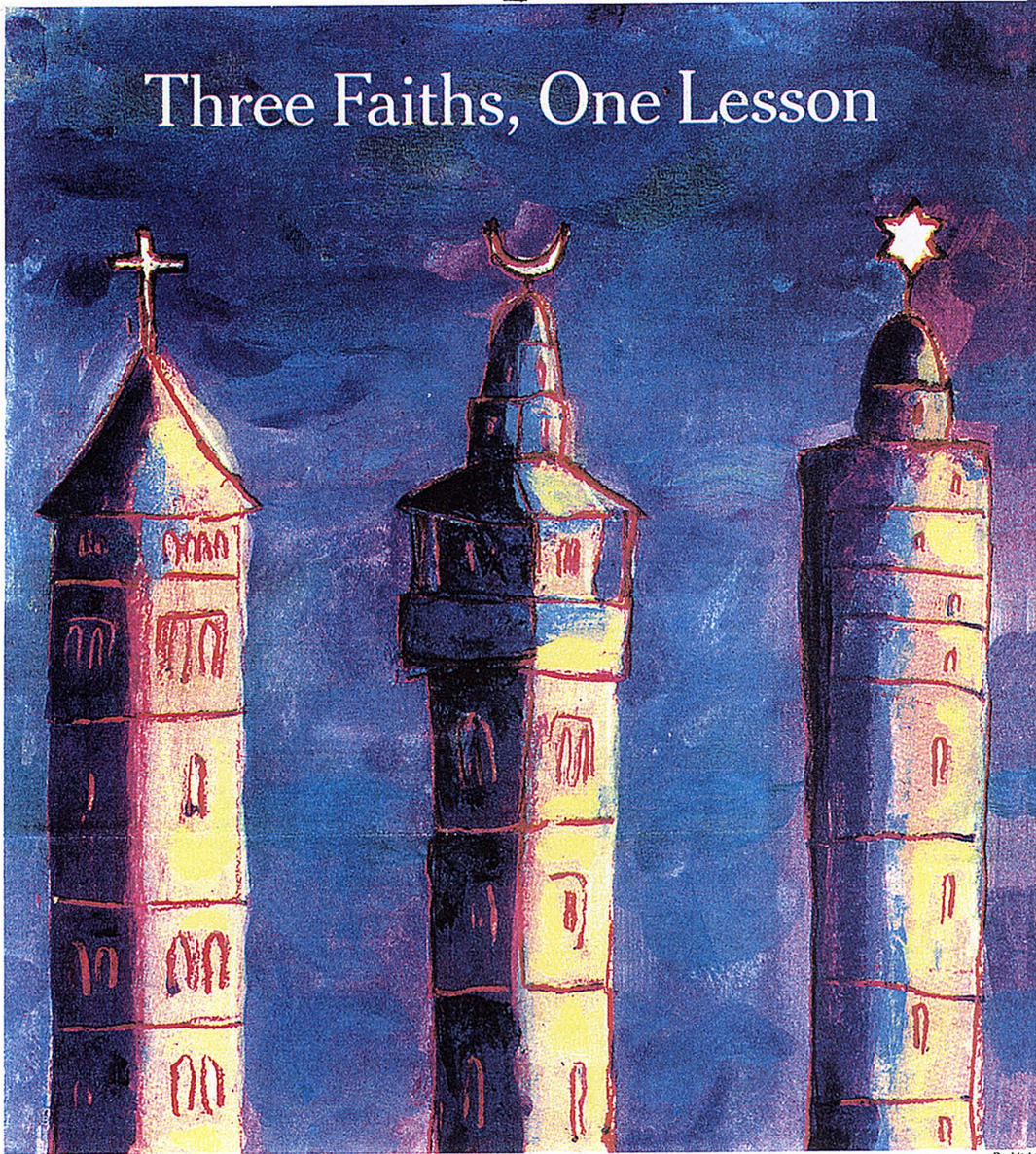


THE Arts

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2005

The New York Times

Three Faiths, One Lesson



Cihat Cansever, 9, with his artwork inspired by the book "Jerusalem Sky," one of whose illustrations is above.

By KATHRYN SHATTUCK

It could have been any class outing as about 90 elementary school students squealed hellos, whispered urgent secrets and stuck tight to their allies.

But on this day the friendships were freshly hatched and the commotion was generated by the delight of discovery, as fourth and fifth graders from the Brooklyn Amity, Hannah Senesh Community Day and Holy Name of Jesus schools set eyes on each other for the first time. The students — Muslim, Jewish and Roman Catholic, respectively — had come together in the final phase of a group project inspired by Mark Podwal's book "Jerusalem Sky: Stars, Crosses, and Crescents" (Doubleday) and sponsored by the Anti-Defamation League.

Yet in some ways, it was just the beginning. Sitting in the lobby of the Brook-

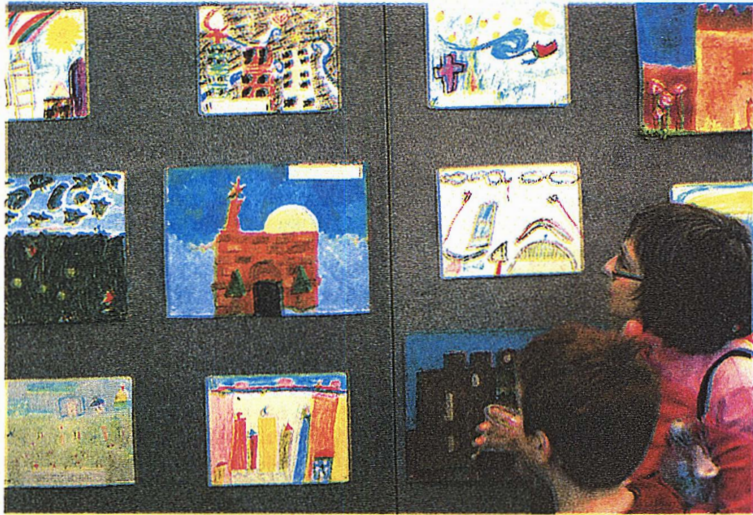
lyn Academy of Music's Opera House, the children nearly bubbled over as Dr. Podwal motioned to a free-standing wall adorned with scores of 11-by-14-inch images that depicted the city of Jerusalem through untarnished eyes.

"I was very moved to see your pictures," he said softly of the works, which will remain on view through Dec. 31. "Very, very pleased."

Cheers erupted. It was this wide-eyed mix of wonderment and mutual understanding that Dr. Podwal and league members, led by their regional director, Joel J. Levy, hoped to spur when they conjured up the idea for the project several months ago, with the three Brooklyn schools as test cases. The students were each given a copy of "Jerusalem Sky" and asked to use the book as a stepping-off point for artworks that would draw upon Dr. Pod-

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Three Faiths, One Lesson, as Schools Learn About Jerusalem.



Photographs by Ruby Washington/The New York Times

A wall of the art by students from three schools; at right, Merve Gecir, 9, with Mark Podwal, whose book "Jerusalem Sky" was the inspiration.



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wal's thesis: while Israel has proclaimed Jerusalem its capital, the city is the spiritual capital of the world's three major monotheistic religions — and equally important to each.

The children were also asked to become pen pals in hopes of fostering familiarity before a meeting whose outcome was anyone's guess.

"They go to their own schools, and they think that's the way everyone is," Dr. Podwal said beforehand. "I'll be curious to see if the kids really interact with each other. It could be like one of those socials, where you have boys against one wall and girls against the other. But it's good in terms of getting to kids before there's any prejudice."

Though only 28 pages long, "Jerusalem Sky" was a two-year, soul-searching undertaking for Dr. Podwal, who has written nearly a dozen children's books with collaborators like Francine Prose and Elie Wiesel and whose art is included in the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. (He has also contributed illustrations to the Op Ed page of The New York Times.)

With wonders and miracles, the sky over Jerusalem touches the world below. Legend says that the Jerusalem sky has a hole in it, made by a jewel that fell from God's throne. Through this hole, hopes reach heaven.

So the book begins. "Sometimes I can spend a night finding the right word," said Dr. Podwal, who is also a

practicing dermatologist.

He juxtaposed his prose against softly delineated images in the searing colors of the Middle East, evoking a city at once mystical and heated, its skyline shimmering with the Star of David atop the synagogue, the cross on the cathedral's spire and the crescent on the apex of the mosque.

"I was struck by the number of legends and scriptural writings that had to do with the sky over Jerusalem," he said. "You have the rabbinic tales that expand on biblical accounts from the first several centuries, the Christian accounts from the Book of Matthew and the pages about Muhammad from the Koran."

Jewish sages tell how, night after night, a full moon shone while Solomon was king. Under his rule the Temple was built. For the seven years it took to complete, rain fell only after dark, so that the work would not be delayed.

Despite Dr. Podwal's efforts to maintain equilibrium, his publisher at first found the book "too Jewish, too inaccessible," he said, and the revisions began.

Muslims tell of the prophet Muhammad's night journey, in which midnight glowed like day when he rode through the sky on a flying horse, then reached heaven on a stairway of light. Where Muhammad rose to heaven now stands a mosque with sky blue stones and dome of gold shining like a second sun.

It was after visiting Jerusalem in 2003, Dr. Podwal said, that he fully understood its common significance.

Christians tell of a wondrous star in the Jerusalem sky, which bright-

ened the winter night, announcing the news of Jesus' birth. And they tell how thirty-three years later, a spring afternoon's daylight blackened into starless night when Jesus died on a small, jagged hill, now crowned by a great church.

Published in August, "Jerusalem Sky" is now entering its second printing. At the Brooklyn Academy of Music on Monday of last week, the Brooklyn borough president, Marty Markowitz, read the book aloud to the children, donning in succession a yarmulke, a cleric's collar and a Muslim prayer cap.

"We have every religion in the world — and some you've never heard of — in Brooklyn," he said. "But whatever we pray, whatever religion we say is ours, there is only one God."

Afterward, students from each of the schools spoke about what they had learned during the project — of myths and legends, of tolerance and even acceptance, of dreams of peaceful coexistence.

And then they swarmed the wall, chattering wildly and beaming for their parents' cameras beneath the artwork — subtle and deliberate or exuberantly interpretive — that embodied their visions for the years ahead.

"I did a picture/painting of one of the many beautiful buildings in Jerusalem," wrote Meirav on her portrait of a golden-domed synagogue. "I did this because it reminded me of a dream I once had, where there was a door, and behind the door the whole world was at peace. I hope that everyone together can open that door some day." (Only the children's first names were used on the artworks.)

Were the children's reactions to "Jerusalem Sky," and to the newfound knowledge of one another's sacred tenets, what Dr. Podwal expected?

"It was much more moving," he said, his eyes filling with tears. "Too many people have a one-dimensional view of Jerusalem, but they have made it three-dimensional."