

# A Conversation with Artist Mark Podwal Who Contributed to the Legendary Rose Family Seder Books

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Mark Podwal at a recent Passover exhibit at The New York Public Library that featured his art.

*Mark Podwal is one of the leading American artists who sees his mission in visual interpretation of the essential values of Judaism and historical journeys of Jewish people over the centuries. Each of his drawings has a deep meaning, each detail is particularly thought through. He lights up the traditional symbols of Judaism with radiating colors that immediately strike you with their freshness. A combination of seriousness and beautiful enchanting simplicity is a distinctive and captivating feature of Podwal's works. He has also developed his own style of calligraphy and micrographic which is especially well articulated in his sophisticated black and white drawings.*

We were fortunate to feature Mark Podwal's art from the [Rose Family Seder Books](https://www.nypl.org/events/exhibitions/rose-seder-books-2023) <<https://www.nypl.org/events/exhibitions/rose-seder-books-2023>> during the recent special Passover exhibit at The New York Public Library. The Rose Family Seder Books are an astounding anthology of extraordinary original art on Passover themes that are now a part of the Dorot Jewish Division's collection. Every year, NYPL features a few pages from these Seder books created by distinctive artists.

Meeting Mark Podwal at The New York Public Library just a few weeks ago was delightful and inspiring. I asked Mark about his path as an artist, his encounter with the Rose family members, and the story of creating drawings for the stunning family albums.

To mark **Jewish American Heritage Month** <<https://www.nypl.org/blog/2023/05/01/nypl-celebrates-jewish-american-heritage-month>> , enjoy this conversation with distinguished American artist Mark Podwal.

## **Where did your interest in art come from? When did you start drawing?**

A childhood memory: It started with an illness, perhaps just a “bad cold,” that caused me to miss the first days of kindergarten. As a result, my name was not on the class roster. When my teacher read out the attendance list, as she did every morning, my name was never called. I participated in whatever my classmates were instructed to do. But until the day my teacher noticed my drawing of a train I was invisible to her. And so, it seemed to me, at the age of five, that my existence depended on my art. Though I always loved to draw, I never pursued formal art training and eventually, my parents encouraged me to become a physician. But while attending medical school, my passion for drawing once again crept in, the tumultuous events of the 1960's compelled me to create a series of political drawings that were published as my first book. These images were brought to the attention of an art director at *The New York Times*, and in 1972, my first drawing appeared on the Op-Ed page of that newspaper. That drawing of the Munich massacre was later included in an exhibition at the Louvre in Paris.

## **When did you begin painting on Jewish themes and why?**

While in medical school, in addition to drawing about American political events of the 1960s, I drew images based on the Six-Day War. In 1972, after reading a letter sent to the UN by the Jews in Soviet Georgia, I illustrated a Haggadah on Soviet Jewry's plight. Theodore Bikel wrote the introduction and Abba Eban, former Israeli Ambassador to the UN, wrote the preface. Perhaps my family history is why I often dwell on Jewish suffering. Museum directors and curators have urged me to broaden my subject matter—to become an artist more universal rather than being limited by Jewish content, but my heart is with the Jewish experience. My mother was born in Dąbrowa, Poland, and left there when she was eight. In 1929, she traveled with her mother and two brothers to the United States. My grandfather had already been living in Brooklyn preparing to bring his family over. My mother's brother David was denied entry into the United States based on a mistaken diagnosis of an eye infection. Every effort by the family to bring David to America failed. When my mother's mother learned that her son David had perished in Treblinka, the Nazi extermination camp in Poland, she became severely depressed and was committed to a psychiatric hospital for the last 18 years of her life. Consequently, my art has long focused on the Holocaust, and I have been extraordinarily fortunate to have been close friends with Elie Wiesel and illustrated many of his books. Moreover, I was even asked to design a thirteen-foot mural for my mother's birthplace to commemorate the town's Jewish past. That mural has been painted on an outside wall of Dąbrowa's high school.

## **How did your art technique and themes develop and change over the years?**

Until 1995 I only created black and white drawings in pen and ink. Two famous artists, David Levine and Richard Lindner, offered to teach me to work in color. However, I declined out of embarrassment. With my first of 13 children's books, I began to work in color with gouache, acrylic, and colored pencil. Since then, most of my art is in color, which has opened many opportunities for me. Painting in color has made my art much looser. I always worked on paper until very recently when I began to paint with acrylics on canvas. During my frequent visits to the Prague Jewish Community, for which I designed textiles for its 700-year-old synagogue, I became interested in Mozart's unique connection to Prague where he was very much more admired and beloved than any other city including Vienna. That interest led to me creating Met Opera posters for Mozart's seven most famous operas and a portfolio of prints, “Mozart and Prague” which were exhibited at the Prague National Library. The original works are in the collection of the Prague National Gallery. My Met Opera posters have twice been exhibited at Prague's Estates Theater where Mozart's opera Don Giovanni premiered.

## **How did you happen to contribute to the Rose Family Seder Books?**

How my drawings were included in the Rose Family Passover book has a humorous twist. Soon after Fred Rose saw my 1980 Jewish Museum exhibition of ink drawings, “A Book of Hebrew Letters,” he phoned my medical office asking how to contact Dr.Podwal's artist son. My secretary informed Fred that Dr. Podwal had no son and that the doctor is the artist whose works are at the Jewish Museum. (My two sons Michael and Ariel were born soon afterwards). Fred then arranged a meeting to tell me about his family's Seder books. For over 20 years, the Rose family had commissioned artwork from some of the most prominent

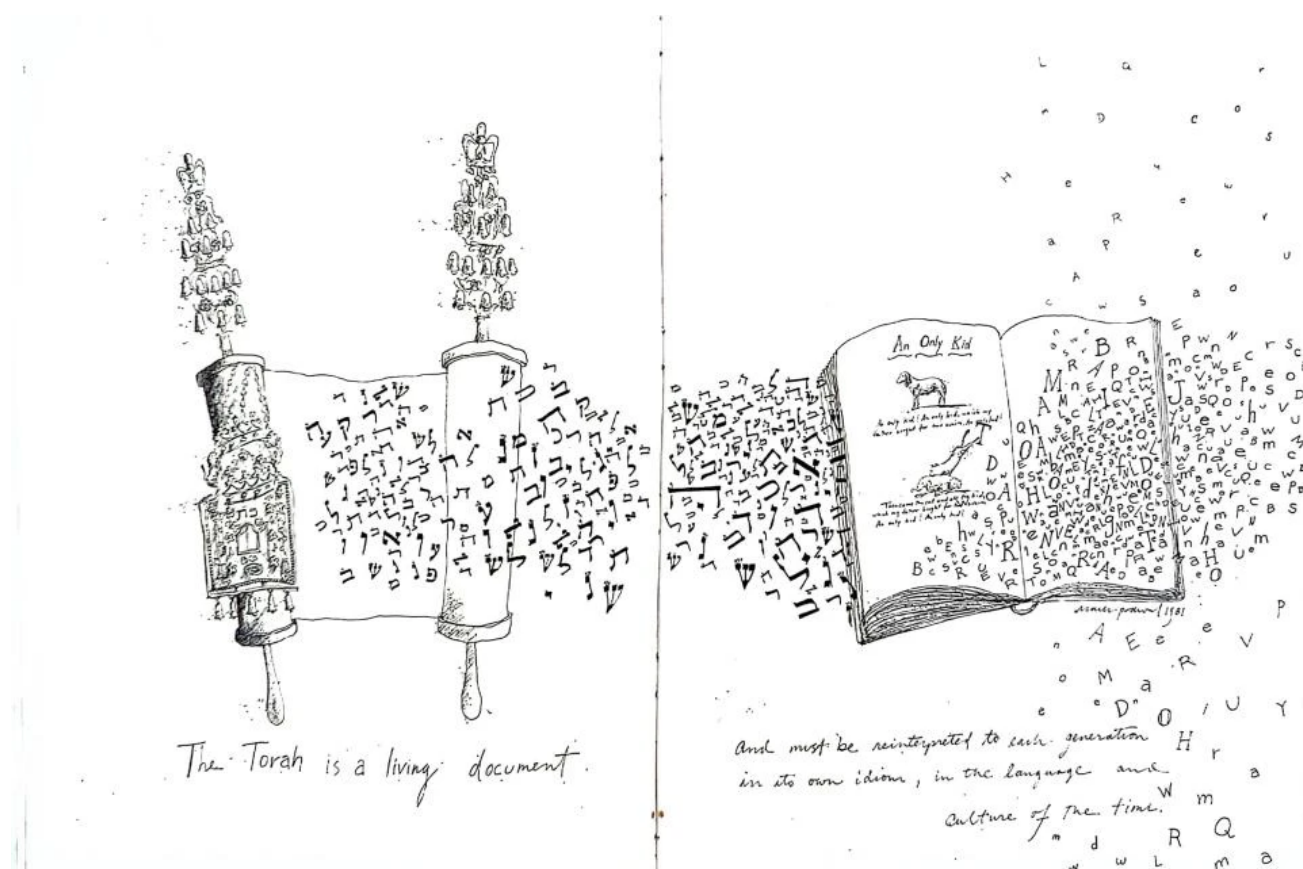
American artists for the family's seder books as part of a family tradition around Passover. Each year, one of the three Rose brothers would choose the artist who would be given quotes to illustrate. Since much of my art is on Jewish subjects, David Levine, well-known for his caricatures in the *New York Book Review*, had previously told me about the Rose Family Seder Books. Frankly, I did not give any thought to what David had mentioned since I could not envision ever being commissioned to create artwork for the project. Fred liked my initial drawings so much that he asked if I would create art for two additional pages, which was more than the other artists were asked to do. Moreover, I was the first artist included in the book who was invited to the Rose family Seder, which was a black-tie Passover celebration. At the Seder, I met members of the Rose family who would years later support a documentary I had written and was producing for PBS as well as donate my art to Yale.

## How as a medical doctor and an artist do you manage to combine both careers?

Initially, in medical school, I intended to be a surgeon. However, when I began to devote more time to my art, which included creating covers for the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, and posters against the war in Vietnam, one of my professors advised that I choose a specialty such as dermatology, radiology, or pathology to have more time for my art. Dermatology is a visual specialty for which my visual skills as an artist are very helpful.

## What projects are on your radar at the moment?

I recently designed two textiles for Prague's High Synagogue built in 1568. Currently, I've been commissioned by the Museum of Jewish Heritage to create artworks on the Museum's upcoming exhibition on Denmark's rescue of its Jews. Those 12 artworks will be a permanent wall installation that will remain long after the exhibition closes. The Met Museum will publish a Rosh Hashanah card of my zodiac images based on Jewish reinterpretations. My current season Met Opera poster is for AIDA. On May 11 my exhibition "A Collage of Customs" will open at the Museum at Eldridge Street and in September the original collages for that series will be exhibited at Amsterdam's Allard Pierson Museum.



Myriads of Hebrew characters flying over the pages as though being taken by the wind symbolize the presence of the Torah in daily life of the Jewish people. Here, Podwal imagines Hebrew characters flying into a Passover Haggadah and being transformed into English letters.