

The Art of Maria Frank Abrams

by David F. Martin

Born in 1924 in Debrecen, Hungary, Maria Frank Abrams (1924–2013) started life as the only child of successful and loving parents. Even though she had no siblings, an older cousin lived with the family and the young man was intelligent, ambitious and a talented musician, planting the seeds for young Maria's interest in artistic expression. As fascism started spreading throughout Europe and Jewish people became targets of maniacal and lethal racism, the young woman and her parents were initially unaware of the seriousness of the encroaching threats and

lived somewhat in denial. In May of 1944, she and her parents were first concentrated into a ghetto—a small closed neighborhood—and then after a few weeks herded by foot to the grounds of a brick factory along the railroad tracks, where they were held without food or water or latrines or shelter for several days until they were transported by train in cattle cars to Auschwitz. Upon arrival, she was separated from her father and eventually her mother, aunts and young cousin.

She later recalled, "...everybody who describes this talks about this tremendous noise, the screaming, and the crying and the orders, but to me it was silence, as if

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there was not a sound in the world." Her parents Irén and Frank Ede were both murdered by the Nazis in the gas chambers at Auschwitz on July 1, 1944. In late September, she was relocated to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in northern Germany. In her later years she recounted an experience during her period in Bergen-Belsen just after she realized that her par-





All illustrated images are collection of the Abrams Family, promised gift to Cascadia Art Museum, unless otherwise stated.

ABOVE: *Maria Frank Abrams in her studio*, c. 1970, courtesy of the Abrams Family.

ABOVE RIGHT: *Untitled*, c. 1980, w/c on paper, 12 1/8 x 17 1/4.

RIGHT: *Illustration for Charles Morgan: "The Voyage,"* c. 1960, casein on paper, 6 1/2 x 5 1/4.

LEFT: *Elemental Sphere*, 1972, casein on paper, 21 x 28 3/4.

ents had been murdered in Auschwitz.

There was a woman in the same barrack where I was...she was an artist; she talked about her work, about her life in Paris, about her past. It was throughout this period when I felt that I wanted to live after all, and that if I lived, I wanted to paint. Later on I was taken from Bergen-Belsen to another concentration camp...it was possible for me to get paper and pencil. And I used to draw, and the women came to me and said... 'Oh, you can draw! Well, would you draw the clothes I used to have in such-and-such a time...and they loved it.' And I loved it.... This desire to become a painter helped me live, and it still does.

At this camp, the conditions were slightly more tolerable, but she was soon transported to a sub-camp at Magdeburg in central Germany, arriving on December 3, 1944. This was a working camp of forced labor and starvation which functioned alongside the Buchenwald death camp overseen by the despicable *Schutzstaffel*





LEFT: *Our Valley*, 1953, casein on paper, 18 x 20 1/2.

BELOW LEFT: *Illustration for Charles Morgan: "The Voyage,"* c. 1960, casein on paper, 6 1/2 x 5 1/4.

RIGHT: *Autumn Bonanza*, 1968, o/c, 38 x 48.

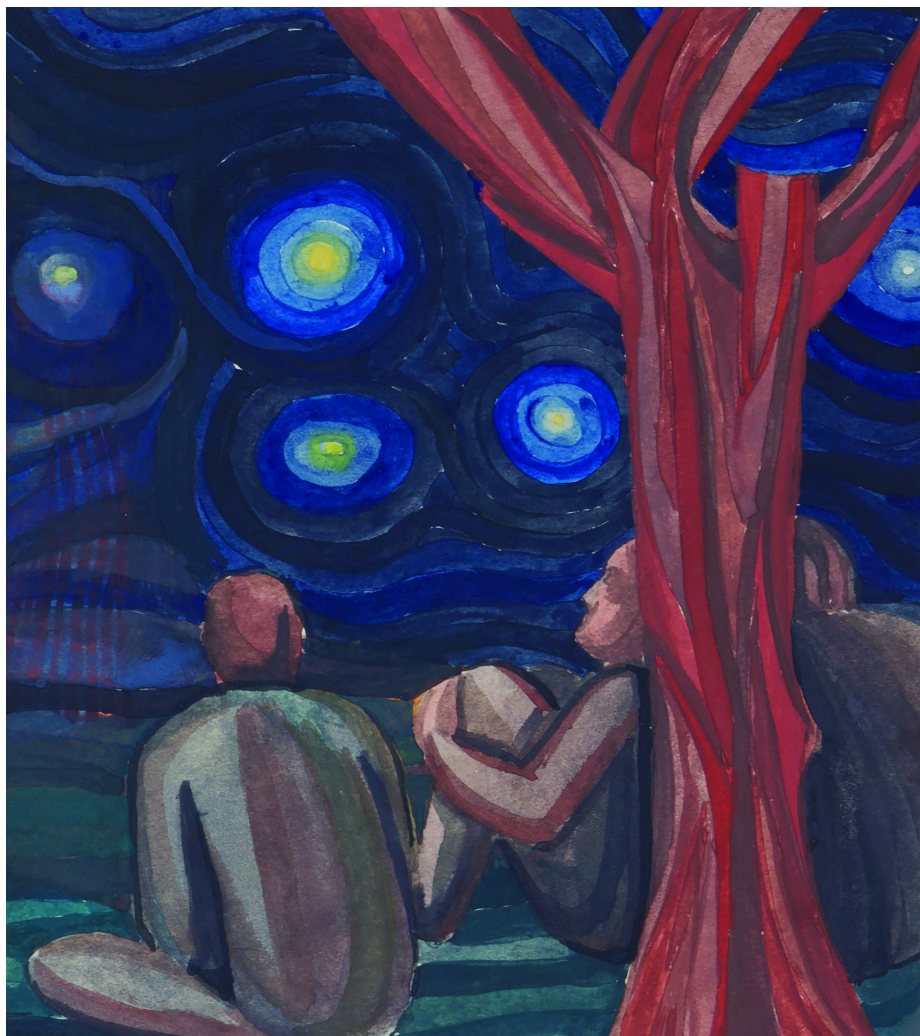
BELOW RIGHT: *Ghosts Among Cinnamon Trees*, 1953, w/c, 22 x 28.

(SS). The camp and factories were bombed by allied forces and the SS left the camp on April 11, 1945.

With the SS gone and the camp no longer under Nazi control, Maria retreated into the neighboring countryside. Finally free but with no clear direction, she lived with farming families and worked in the asparagus fields. By May 9th she realized the war was over and with many others, made her way to the American troops in Zerbst. She soon began her trek back to Hungary, arriving in Budapest in early June.

Although Maria was relieved to be reunited with her few surviving family members, she felt unable to remain in Hungary, and in early 1946 made her way to a displaced persons camp in Linz, Austria, where she worked for the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. That same year she received a Hillel Foundation scholarship and two years later, left Hungary to study at the University of Washington (UW) in Seattle. The University's art department became a refuge, giving her the opportunity to develop as an artist and to receive support from her professors and fellow students. Within the year, she married Syd Abrams, a history student at the UW who had recently returned from his service as a volunteer crew member on a ship running Holocaust survivors through the British blockade to Palestine.

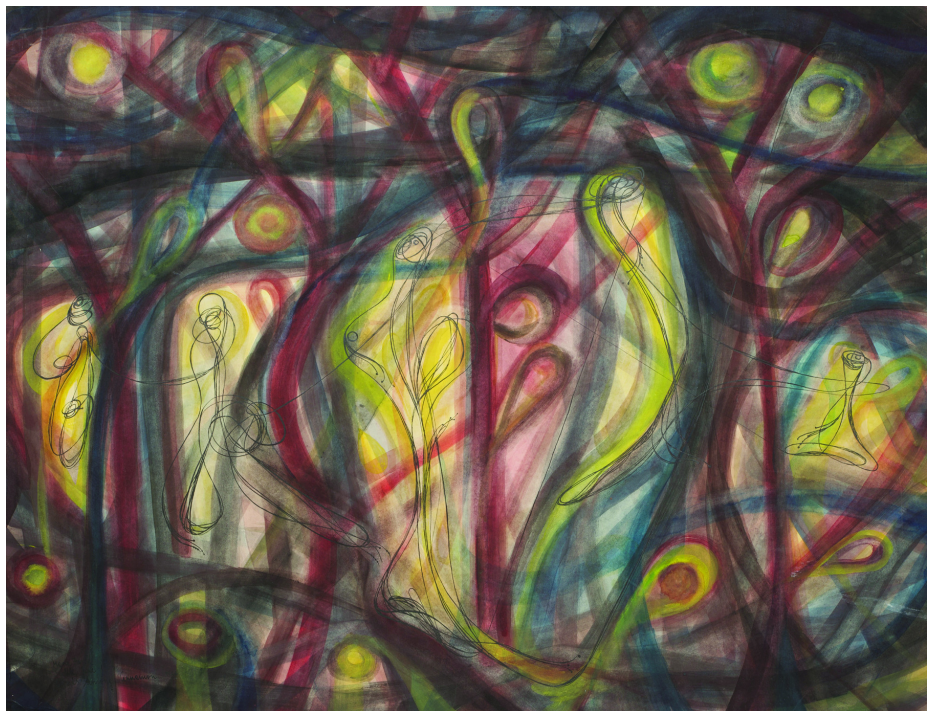
During her studies she was particularly inspired by her instructor Walter Isaacs, an American artist who had success in the Paris Salons of the 1920s. He became her friend and mentor. After graduating *summa cum laude*, she embarked on a career in the fine arts and very quickly received recognition for her work. Her paintings were unique among the dominant regional styles of the period. Rather than displaying Asian influences, common among leading artists such as Morris Graves and Mark Tobey, Abrams' approach reflected a knowledge of European modernism in the work of artists such as Paul Klee and Lyonel Feininger.





Although Abrams worked in oil, she began concentrating on art materials such as watercolor, ink and casein. One would expect an artist with the challenging life experiences that she endured to illustrate the dark side of life, but her work reflected just the opposite. She created her own world of surrealistic figures and landscapes using complicated compositional structures and rhythmic color harmonies, like a visual equivalent of music. Her paintings are imbued with light and hope and display an acute love and sensitivity to nature and the atmospheric conditions of the Northwest. Her work calls to mind the quote from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*: "And this our life, exempt from public haunt, Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, Sermons in stones, and good in everything. I would not change it."

Beginning in 1953 Abrams was represented by Seattle's Otto Seligman



Gallery, the most prominent regional commercial gallery of the time. She was a long-time member and exhibitor with the Northwest Watercolor Society (NWWs), beginning in 1952. That same year she won an award at the Western Washington Fair Art Exhibit along with artists Wendell Brazeau and Kenjiro Nomura. She won three awards with the NWWs in 1954, 1955 and 1975. In 1957, she received a solo exhibition at the Seattle Art Museum along with regional artists Wendell Brazeau, Jane Hovde and Harold Wahl.

In the following years, Abrams received numerous awards and appeared in invitational and juried exhibitions at the Seattle Art Museum, the San Francisco Museum of Art, the Denver Art Museum, and the Oakland Municipal Art Museum, among others. She also designed the sets and costumes for the opera *The Dybbuk*, which had its world premiere in the Seattle Center Playhouse in 1962, and she designed sets for Seattle Opera's production of *La Traviata* in the Seattle Opera House in 1963.

In 1966 Dr. Richard E. Fuller, the founder and director of the Seattle Art Museum, selected her to participate in the Governor's Invitational Exhibition. She was one of the thirty-five leading regional artists to participate. The show traveled to Kobe, Japan, as well as throughout the state of Washington. In 1975 she was again included in the Governor's Invitational Exhibition and completed a mural for the Mercer Island Public Library.

During the subsequent years, Maria Frank Abrams participated in major shows both invitational and competitive. In 1992 her life and work came full circle when she received a solo retrospective at the Vizualart Galeria in Budapest, Hungary. A posthumous exhibition of the artist's works was held in 2015 at the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust.

In 2010, Book Publishers Network released the monograph *Burning Forest: The Art of Maria Frank Abrams* by Matthew Kangas. In the book she said: "It is the landscape surrounding us that gives me inspiration, visual stimulus; it has been the source of my work. From the changing seasons flow continual variations of color, light and shape. Nature is always perfect; my task is to transform the original inspiration into my vision of nature. A new world independent of anything else must be created in the picture plane."