

Hand & Spirit of Influential Las Vegas Artist Touches Others

by Deborah H. Perlman

The Straus' home is not The Metropolitan Museum of Art nor is it the Israeli museum, but its contents contain similar treasures that range from the Modernist's abstract style to Judaic folk art.

These treasures are created in almost every medium imaginable including wood construction, woodblock prints, pottery, batik, fabric design, paper, sculpture, glass, basketry and wearable art.

Every piece of art, and there must be thousands, was created with the vitality, skill and imagination of one person - Las Vegas artist, Joyce Straus.

In 1963, Straus brought her young family from Philadelphia to Las Vegas so her husband, Neil, a family physician, could fulfill his two years of medical service at Nellis Air Force Base. "Twenty years ago, (in 1973) my five children were becoming independent and I decided to be an artist," says Straus. Enrolling in a UNLV art class for three weeks, Straus realized that she had a unique style of drawing that could develop more quickly on her own. Straus then tackled the first couple of many mediums to come, pottery and weaving.

One year later and with six students, Straus started the School of Creative Thinking in her home studio. Today, she teaches more than 175 students of all ages.

Straus is deeply committed to per-

petuating her Judaic heritage through art. Most Jewish folk art is comprised of objects closely connected to the spirit of biblical stories, ceremonial life, festivals and the Sabbath.

According to Straus, "The reason I focus on Judaic folk art is its almost total absence in contemporary society." She adds, "Needlepoint work is about the only hand work being done today by Jewish people."

She explains that Jewish folk art of the 1700s, 1800s, and early 1900s flourished until the oncoming of industrialized society. Straus continues, "It seems sad that with all the wonderful technological progress we've had, it has discouraged rather than encouraged the creation of (Judaic folk) art."

The common thread which is pervasive in Straus' Judaic folk art is the element of narrative. One of her wood plates expresses the Adam and Eve story which is part of a 27-piece series called "Eve's Gift to Adam". This series represents the male/female struggle in contemporary society.

Yet, another wood bas-relief recreates the story of "Akedah" or binding of Isaac, complete with moving parts.

One particularly endearing painting is of her great-grandmother whose image from a photo was used for a project that demonstrates Straus' technical skills. Straus describes how she used her great-grandmother's image to prove to herself



Artist Joyce Straus displays her Judaic works meant to visually evoke the spirit of Jewish identity.

that she could do realistic work, (which she did) but has no further interest in realism. "I believe it is the artist's responsibility to bring to the world imagery that goes beyond the obvious," says Straus.

Straus, a member of Temple Beth Sholom, has Judaic works decorating the walls of Congregation Ner Tamid and secular, large-scale works displayed throughout Las Vegas including a wood construction sculpture in the Nephrology Center. One of her other large-scale public art pieces was commissioned for a \$50 million condominium complex in Phoenix.

When Straus is not teaching art,

whether at home or at the Hebrew Academy, she's providing an array of catering services for local convention businesses including table designs, along with what else but - edible art!

Besides the studio in her home, she has three separate workshops and a charming gallery for purchasing her one-of-a-kind collectibles and pure aesthetic museum-quality pieces.

In Straus' teaching studio, a fabric wall hanging poignantly restates a line from the movie, "Crimes and Misdemeanors", and Straus emphatically repeats it, "We are the sum total of all the choices we make."