George Zahn: 00:12 We wish you a wonderful afternoon and we thank you for joining us for spotlight here on WMKV and WLHS. I've had a great opportunity to come down to the Skirball Museum at Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, 3101 Clifton Avenue, but today we have a visitor in our studios and that is Abby Schwartz from the Skirball Museum at HUC. Abby, thanks for coming to our studios this time.

Abby Schwartz: 00:35 I'm delighted to be here, George. Always a pleasure.

George Zahn: 00:38 Many people may not realize that Israel has turned 70 years old and with your art background and your great love of art, you have put together an incredible exhibition at the Skirball Museum, Israel at 70: A History in Art and Artifacts that's running through June 3rd.

Abby Schwartz: 00:55 George, you are right. This is a big year and one of the things that I think is so interesting as I began to prepare for this exhibition is that on May 14th of 1948, David Ben-Gurion, who was Israel's first prime minister, read the Declaration of Independence of Israel in the Tel Aviv museum. Now that building is now known as Independence Hall, but he was there standing beneath a photograph of Theodor Herzl who is the founder of modern Zionism, and he was surrounded by an exhibition of paintings by Jewish artists, so it just sort of struck me that, oh my goodness, so this always had an art component, but what we've done in this 70th anniversary year in keeping with a lot of other programming in the community to commemorate this very important date, is that we've put together an exhibition that really deals with the evolution of art in Israel. It doesn't actually even start with 1948. It starts with 1906.

George Zahn: 01:56 Right, because you have a lecture coming up in April on pre-WWII art in Israel as well. This is part of an entire lecture series that's also going to involve children. You have an incredible lecture series in addition to the exhibition that's going on. As you said, you go back to the early 1900s for some of this art.

Abby Schwartz: 02:17 Right, so if you think about it. What we currently know as Israel was occupied by the Ottoman Turks and then the British, so we refer to Ottoman occupied Palestine and then British mandate Palestine, and in those early years in the early years of the twentieth century, a lot of Jewish people came to Palestine. They were actually escaping pogroms in eastern Europe and they came there to settle and at the very outset in 1906, a man
named Boris Schatz, who was a very well established artist working in Bulgaria. He came there and established an art school called the Bezalel School of Arts and Crafts, and it was his goal along with the Zionist leaders who were pushing for statehood for Israel to create an opportunity for immigrants to work who came from countries where they had certain art skills and also to create not only functional but beautiful objects that could be used in the home. Furniture, carpets, you name it.

Abby Schwartz: 03:22

So it was sort of an industrial model like the Victoria and Albert. And it was applied to this early school that began in 1906. So this exhibition has worked from that period and then there's a huge transition when artists start coming from other parts of Europe who have seen what's going on in Paris, for instance, they've seen the works of Picasso the works with Miro, they've seen the work of Chagall and they come and they say, well, we don't want to make art that looks like the villages and shtetls, the communities of Eastern Europe. We want to make something that is specific to this land. So the art starts to not only reflect the quality of light and local color, of the Arab populations, and the flora and the fauna, but also starts to have the influence of European artists. So you get to a certain point in this exhibition and you're saying, well, I could be in the museum of Modern Art, I could be in the Louvre.

Abby Schwartz: 04:21

What is particularly Israeli about these works? And what we try to seek as we look at them is a connection to the land and awareness of this very particular landscape of these desert areas and these mountainous areas and these other areas that are arid and that are lush. So you get a sense of that development, but at the same time, this movement toward abstraction and expressionism and rich, beautiful color all the way up to what's going on in contemporary Israel, which is really so many media. There's a lot of film, there's a lot of photography, we'll be dealing with that more in our course. This little three part mini series on the history of art in Israel. The show itself has photographs and paintings and also things that are three dimensional. So ritual objects, again, that show the evolution from the early very plain and simple works of the Bezalel school in its early years.

Abby Schwartz: 05:21

It has sort of an old world feel to it, but as we move through time again in each section, those objects for the purposes of lighting the candles, or drinking the wine on the Sabbath, or Menorahs for celebrating Hanukkah, they start to get more modern and more contemporary. And you see that development from sort of the traditional to the contemporary. So not only in paintings and photographs and lithographs, but
also in objects that are three dimensional in cases. So we have 48 works in the show that was not intentional on the day of the opening, we've figured out that there were 48 and of course 1948 is the year.

George Zahn: 05:21 It was beshert.

Abby Schwartz: 06:03 Yes, it was meant to be. Yes. We're also really pleased that we have the opportunity to include in this exhibition, not only things that are part of our permanent collection that we've had for many years, but we're also showcasing many works from the B'nai B'rith Klutznick, National Jewish Museum's collection, which we absorbed a few years ago in 2015, but this is the first time these beautiful modern Israeli paintings that are part of the period from the forties to the sixties. These are big names in Israeli art. They're not on everyone's lips, but if you open a textbook about art in Israel, names like Joseph Zaritsky, Stematksy, Marcel Janco, Yosl Bergner. These are in the index. There's several pages about each of these artists and several works and these are works. Many of them that were part of the B'nai B'rith collection that have been shuttered. They've been in storage since the year 2000, so we're showcasing many of those works in this show as well, and they're colorful and they're gorgeous and they really look wonderful.

George Zahn: 07:09 We're talking about Israel at 70, which is an exhibition at the Skirball Museum, 3101 Clifton Avenue, Abby Schwartz, our special guest here, and I should hasten to add Israel at 70: A History in Art and Artifacts as Abby pointed out, not just paintings, not just photographs, but also three dimensional figures, 48 of them in this wonderful gallery and I urge you to stay and also tour the rest of the Skirball Museum. I've been through it by the way, the Skirball is located at 3101 Clifton Avenue on the campus of Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, the Clifton campus. They're open Tuesday and Thursday 11:00 AM to 4:00 PM. They're open Sundays, 1:00 to 5:00 PM. You can also schedule tours as well. They're very happy to schedule tours. 513.487.3098. You can also find out more at Huc.edu and search under Skirball there as well.

George Zahn: 08:03 Abby Schwartz here with us and Abby, I know we're talking a lot about this Israel at 70: A History in Art and Artifacts exhibition and one of the things that I always fear when people hear it's at Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, that they feel like you have to be Jewish to get something out of this or to even attend. This is open to everybody who wants to learn more about history.
Abby Schwartz: 08:25 Yes, that is absolutely true and we have many members who are not Jewish. We have board members who are not Jewish. We welcome everyone and I think what people discover when they come to the museum, even if it's not for a special exhibition, there is so much about the ritual and the objects that are part of the Jewish faith that they can find commonalities with in whatever faith they might observe. There's also a great story about immigration. All of us came from somewhere, so we all have that story and we can relate to that and in the case of this exhibition, there is a great deal in it that really deals with the development of modern art. People will find affinities with artists they have seen in other museums and a connection with the work no matter what their faith.

George Zahn: 09:12 Abby, you mentioned the fact that in 2015 Skirball Museum was able to assimilate an incredible collection that came from the B'nai B'rith museum in Washington D.C., can you give us just a brief history of Skirball for those people who may be hearing about this for the first time on today's show?

Abby Schwartz: 09:30 Absolutely. The campus is, as you said, on Clifton Avenue, that is not the original home of Hebrew Union College. It was founded in 1875. Originally had its home in downtown Cincinnati, but in 1912 the campus opened on Clifton Avenue and a library was part of that campus and at the time that the library was formed, people started to bring objects and art to the library, so a small but choice museum sort of was born and with the help of the National Sisterhood Organization, a women's division of the Reform movement. There was a gallery that actually was founded. It was called the Union Museum, that eventually over time kept growing. Exactly, 1990 the building, we are now in opened and it is named the Skirball Museum in honor of Jack Skirball, who was a very important donor to the museum and he himself was trained as a Rabbi at HUC in Cincinnati, went on to be in media and real estate and his name is connected with several institutions in the HUC family, but we bear that name in our museum.

George Zahn: 10:47 Just as Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion is one of just four campuses worldwide, it's so important because Cincinnati is the birth of the Reform Jewish movement, so having this museum here and the Klutznick collection coming almost back home, in some ways, to Cincinnati is a real feather in the cap for Skirball Museum here at HUC.

Abby Schwartz: 11:07 It certainly has expanded our holdings exponentially. We had a collection of about 400 objects in the collection from B'nai B'rith is roughly 1500 objects, so we've more than quadrupled our
holdings and we don’t have the space right now to show all of it all the time.


Abby Schwartz: 11:26 We’re looking for every opportunity to show more of it and right now between this exhibition Art in Israel and another exhibition that is not on the gallery floor, but as sort of dispersed on another level. This is a show of drawings by a New York artists named Mark Podwal that’s related to many of our Klutznick objects. We have more of the Klutznick collection on view at one time than we’ve ever been able to do since it arrived, so we’re thrilled to be able to showcase this wonderful, wonderful work.

George Zahn: 11:57 And you were talking about the fact that your burgeoning collection through the Klutznick collection is still growing and this exhibition will have some recent gifts.

Abby Schwartz: 12:09 I want to talk about those recent gifts, but before I do that, I did want to also mention that we have this exhibition on the fourth floor which has these 48 works, but our core collection, our main collection a floor below, and it’s sort of an open plan so you can see the third floor from the fourth floor. We have left many of our art of Israel on the third floor. We didn’t pull it out of the core collection and have an entirely separate booklet where you can go onto the third floor and see other works by Israeli artists that augment what you’ll see on the fourth floor, but back to the recent gifts, one of our signature images that we’ve been using in all of our promotional materials is a work by an artist named Moshe Castel. Again, in the world of Israeli art, you just have to say Castel.

Abby Schwartz: 12:56 It’s like Picasso. How many people use Pablo? Everybody knows Picasso. He has a one word name, and Castel was one of these artists who was part of this effort to bring modernity to the table in art in Israel, and he was part of a group known as the New Horizons group, and it was their total mission to bring a modern aesthetic using abstraction and expressionism to the artwork we were given just in time for this exhibition a beautiful painting on paper by Moshe Castel. It’s called Ancient Scroll. It actually depicts in very sort of naïve looking figures and beautiful rich color, Mordechai from the Bible leading Haman through the streets of Shushan on a horse. This is part of the story that is part of the holiday of Purim. It’s part of the scroll of Esther, a book that details really a story in which a woman and her cousin who is Mordechai, Esther and Mordechai essentially save the Jewish people from destruction.
Abby Schwartz: 14:07  Not going to go into the whole story, but in one part of the story, the evil Haman who is their nemesis, is forced by the king who was Esther's husband to parade Mordechai through the streets of their city, their town, which was Shushan and Haman thought that that special honor was going to be reserved for him. So he was pretty mad that he had to do this. So it's a beautiful piece that recalls ancient scrolls. It's called Ancient Scroll. At this time in his career, Castel was sort of attempting to bring back the ancient look of artwork and he went on in his career to actually work with basalt, with an actual stone carving into the stone, sort of creating a modern calligraphy because he sort of wanted to get in touch with the basic, the elemental, so there's an aspect of sort of a childlike quality to this work and beautiful expressive color and abstractions, so it's a far cry from these sort of very European looking images that began with Boris Schatz when he started the Bezalel School, but not many years had passed before this change came.

George Zahn: 14:07  I love when you give us the provenance, that is just absolutely incredible.

Abby Schwartz: 15:22  This gift was made to us by Polly and Jacob Stein and it was in honor of Polly's parents Edith and James L. Magrish and this piece, when we, when we received it on the back, there's a little sticker that says Contemporary Art Center, 1949. I think. Again, thinking of provenance and thinking of the history that this painting has had, it was shown at the really just born Contemporary Art Center and Edith Magrish was part of this group of women, predominantly women who saw the need for contemporary art in our city and started to bring together works that could be part of many shows and this work appeared in a show at the Contemporary Art Center all those years ago.

George Zahn: 16:09  And right about at the time of the birth of Israel.

Abby Schwartz: 16:10  That's exactly right. They purchased it in Israel.

George Zahn: 16:18  So many things that keep coming back here, Abby Schwartz is our special guest. She is with the Skirball Museum at Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, the Clifton campus. They have an incredible museum there. In full disclosure, I have a daughter who works with Abby there as well, so I'm a little biased, but it really is something to see. They're at 3101 Clifton Avenue and they have hours opening Tuesday and Thursday 11:00 AM to 4:00 PM. Sundays 1 to 5, but you can schedule tours. They're more than happy to schedule tours from everything from individuals to groups. 513.487.3098. We'll give that again at the end of the program if you want to find out
more about Israel at 70, which is running through June third. That's Israel at 70: A History in Art and Artifacts. You can find it also at huc.edu. Search for Skirball there as well. That's Skirball.

George Zahn: 17:10 Abby Schwartz here with us. And I want to talk to you about the lecture series because one of the things I am so happy and I am also a member of the Skirball Museum.

Abby Schwartz: 17:10 Yes you are.

George Zahn: 17:20 So again, in full disclosure, I have to say that one of the things that I've so loved is when you have special programs around the exhibition. Let's talk about your lecture series coming up later in the spring here. There's going to be cooking and music and all kinds of things, but let's talk about the lecture series that'll be kicking off starting on Wednesday, April 11th.

Abby Schwartz: 17:39 Yes, absolutely. We try to do public programming around all of our exhibitions that brings the work alive and in this instance I decided to put together a three part evening series. It's three Wednesdays in April, the 11th, the 18th and the 25th, and basically breaking Israeli art into three segments doesn't really fall easily into three, but we're making it three and I'll be teaching this. On the last one I'll be bringing in a friend and I'll explain that as we get to the third one, but the first class, and I've taught about Jewish art in the community through the Melton School, which no longer exists and also at OLLI I've taught many courses on Jewish art, so I'll be doing the teaching with powerpoint and lots of discussion and opportunities to look at images as we talk and then actually to be in the gallery and look at works for the show that relate. So the first one will be about the Arts and Crafts movement that I have mentioned. The development of the Bezalel school and the pioneer artists who were very much attached to the land and really began what became an indigenous Israeli art form.

George Zahn: 18:50 April 11th at 7:00 PM. If you want to find out more, They do ask, it's great to have reservations for this. Please do that. And the number for reservations. Is it the same number for tour? It's the same number. So that number again is 513.487.3098. And if you've enjoyed listening to Abby so far during this program, she's going to be the one teaching especially the first two sessions. And then co-teaching the third session. So the lecture series starts on April the 11th with the art in Israel before World War Two. So kind of pre Israeli statehood art. Definitely. So then the next Wednesday, April 18th. Tell us about that.
Abby Schwartz: 19:27 So April 18th will be sort of after the Second World War. This will be considering of course the impact of the war and the founding of the state on artists, including again, these are big names in Israeli art. Mordecai Ardon, Marcel Janco. And the formation of the New Horizons group, this group that was really determined to bring modern art to the foreign, this really sort of started before the war. As I said, none of these divisions are written in stone. It's a lot of gray areas, but artists like Joseph Zaritsky and Avigdor Stematsky, Moshe Castel, they brought modernism and abstraction to the forefront of Israeli art. So that will be the subject of the second lecture.

George Zahn: 20:06 Then the third lecture will be a week after that on Wednesday, April 25th. So again the lectures are the 11th, the 18th and the 25th. And this one focuses more on contemporary Israeli art. So this is even more probably multimedia than what you were talking about in the first two.

Abby Schwartz: 20:23 I will be sharing the podium with my friend and colleague, Rabbi Ofer Sabath Beit Halachmi. He is both an artist and a teacher and he will actually be bringing some of his own artwork that he has either made himself or collaborated with. Actually one of the artists who is in the exhibition and we'll be looking at some video. We'll be looking at some youtube, we'll be looking at some installation art, we'll be seeing some paintings and photographs and really sort of getting a feel for what constitutes contemporary Israeli art and what specifically makes it Israeli and that's an interesting question.

George Zahn: 20:23 Especially in today's world.

Abby Schwartz: 21:06 Exactly, exactly. But you'll see that they are often reacting even in the show. The artists are often reacting to their geography, their reacting to political events and to military events and to loss and love and some of these are common themes with other artists, but some of them are very particular to Israel so we will get that feeling.

George Zahn: 21:29 Abby Schwartz, our very special guest here on spotlight on WMKV and WLHS. Abby, in our final moments on this program and we'll have to have you back to talk more in depth about some of these, but I know we mentioned this earlier in the program, the Children of Cincinnati and Children of Jerusalem. There is an incredible angle here and if you could just give us a thumbnail maybe of that, also some of the other facets including cooking. We're going to have food coming up. You can't have Judaism without food, you can't. I don't think you're going to have any ethnic or religious or cultural movement
without food in there somewhere, so even food will be involved, but tell us about some of the other programs and then we'll have you back to talk more in-depth about things.

Abby Schwartz: 22:08

There is an aspect of the show that showcases parts of another acquisition or gift to the collection. It's a group of over 200 drawings and collages and paintings by children of Jerusalem and these are Palestinian and Israeli children who are brought together in two school programs that each lasted three years, after school programs essentially. These were a response to the intifada where the children had no after school activities. A lot of things were curtailed and there was an effort by the Institute for the Study of Religions and Communities in Israel to bring kids together of different faiths and try to figure out how they could bridge that gap. And of course we know how children are. How, especially in today's world, what we've recently seen with the latest school shooting. These kids really get it and the things they paint and the words that they bring to this experience of working with Palestinian children, working with Israeli children and Israeli children, working with Palestinian children and seeing what they have in common and not what separates them so this work is extraordinary and we are building an after school program with a lot of our community partners, but we are going to have a family program on Sunday, April 29th where we will bring together children of all faiths and their families for viewing this part of the exhibition in particular and in an art-making activity again, to bring communities together.

George Zahn: 23:39

Sometimes it's the kids. What's the old phrase from the mouths of Babes, right? Kids will have the more visceral or the more honest reaction to everything. It's not colored by their experience. It is what it is and what an incredible opportunity to see the Jewish children, the Palestinian children and how they are inter-communicating. It gives us hope.

Abby Schwartz: 24:01

Yes, it certainly does, and this will be on a Sunday afternoon. It's the 29th of April at 1:30. Just an opportunity to have a one day experience with this work, but as I said, we are working on creating a program for our community that is modeled after the Israeli Palestinian program that existed in Israel in the early 2000s.

George Zahn: 24:23

And if you want to learn more about that, it's called Children of Jerusalem, Painting Pain, Dreaming Peace, beautiful, beautiful, and also food. We mentioned food.
On May 15th, there will be a program called From Palate to Palette, different spellings of those words that sound the same. The Art of Israeli cooking and we'll be joined by a local chef. Her name is Rotem Greniman and she is Israeli and she's known for her unique and flavorful Middle Eastern inspired dishes. She is really excited. I've heard things that we're going to make some incredible tasty things that are easy to do and there'll be demonstration and tasting and that's going to be at 5:30 in the afternoon on Tuesday, May 15th, and the final program and actually is a little bit before the cooking program is a musical program featuring Yael Front who is actually studying for her doctorate in conducting at CCM, but she is also the conductor for the Cincinnati Chamber opera. She's Israeli. Her program is called Beyond Milk and Honey and she is going to be exposing us to modern Israeli music. Popular music from the hora all the way to what's on the radio today in Israel and she is bringing a three piece band and she herself sings. So that's on May 6th and that's at 4:00 in the afternoon at the Skirball.

If any of these items intrigued you. The lecture series, April 11th, 18th and 25th, the Children of Cincinnati and Children of Jerusalem on Sunday, April 29th. The musical program on May 6th or the From Palate to Pallet on May 15th. If you want to find out more about these, if you would like to reserve to come to these, you can always call the Skirball Museum at Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion. They're located at 3101 Clifton Avenue. You can always call at 513.487.3098. The exhibition that is running now through June 3rd is Israel at 70: A History in Art and Artifacts, these extra lectures and extra programs that you can experience as well. Abby, thank you for taking a few moments here with us on WMKV and WLHS on spotlight.

My pleasure to be here, George. Thank you for having me.

And we also thank you for your support of this public radio station as well. Thank you so much. Abby Schwartz, if you need to find out anything more about this, you can also look at huc.edu. Search under Skirball, S-K-I-R-B-A-L-L, or give them a call at 513.487.3098. We also have information here at WMKV. We thank Abby Schwartz for being here with us. And thank you for listening to WMKV and WLHS Spotlight.

Out Music