Nathan Hilu’s Journal: Word, Image, Memory
Published in conjunction with the exhibition

**Nathan Hilu’s Journal: Word, Image, Memory**
Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion Museum
September 6, 2011 – March 30, 2012

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion Museum, New York
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This exhibition is presented by the Irma L. and Abram S. Croll Center for Jewish Learning and Culture at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, with the generous support of George, z”l, and Mildred Weissman, and Cantor Mimi Frishman and Rabbi Louis Frishman.

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Printed in the United States of America in 2011 by Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
Brookdale Center, One West Fourth Street
New York, NY 10012-1186

Front Cover:
*Lag B’Omer*, mixed media collage, 23” x 30”;
Courtesy of Herman Lowenhar.

Back Cover:
*Congregation Derech Amuno Synagogue*, oil pastel on paper, 34” X 30”;
Collection of Herman Lowenhar.
Utter belief in the reality of the Talmud and midrashic interpretations propels Nathan Hilu, with urgency and vigor, to create visionary drawings based on Jewish texts. Working in the style best described as art brut, his stream of consciousness images intertwine with commentary. Art brut is the name given in 1945 by the renowned French painter Jean Dubuffet to the powerfully expressive art style created by artists, such as Rousseau, lacking in formal training. Produced with profound honesty as a means of sharing personal thoughts and not intended for commercial profit, art brut is frequently referred to as ‘outsider art.’

‘Outsider art’ is uncommon in the Jewish contemporary art world. Shadowed by the interpretation of the Second Commandment, Jews were long discouraged from professionally studying studio art or pursuing careers as artists. ‘Naïf art’ was further stigmatized because of its possible connection to mental or emotional imbalances. In passing years, a deeper understanding of the expressive imperative has come into play. Contemporary Jewish ‘naïf’ artists, including Malcah Zeldis and Meyer July, have captured the innocence of forgotten times and places.

Surrealist in sensibility, combining seemingly random ideas and images, Hilu’s works are at the same time enigmatic and narrative, with uninhibited fantasies as well as minute attention to details. Hilu communicates through his passionate, frantic drawings, adding collage and writing to share his inner view of events, real and experienced, as well as biblical, legendary, and historical.

In recalling his family history, Hilu proudly remembers his Syrian heritage in his own words:

My grandfather was Hacham Bashi Nissim Andibo, Chief Rabbi of Damascus, Syria, who blessed Eli Cohen, the Israeli spy, before his hanging in 1965. Until the age of 116 he was the Rabbi.

The artist Abel G. Warshawsky, whom I met while studying the Russian language at the U.S. Army School of many languages in Monterey, California. He had his art studio in Pacific Grove, California, and encouraged me to do art. It was he who studied under Camille Pissarro. He told me you must study art my bon ami...your colors are like Pissarro, the French artist, the Sephardic Jew. My family came from Damascus and were dyers of cloth using the color purple. Warshawsky told me that Pissarro also used the exotic color because we were Sephardic Jews. We used the color that the Phoenicians used! Ancient Israel used purple for the tallis from a sea shell. He said that an artist must have velt shmerz, he must feel the pain of the world...

Saul Raskin was also my art teacher...he lived on 16th Street by the same St. Xavier Church near Union Square. He lived in Berlin, Germany – he was my first art teacher in Jewish art. He had painted the Lower East Side and also Israel! I believe that he is a second Marc Chagall. He told me to read many books on art. In his studio he was drawing a BIG wedding of Jewish Poland. I am honored in meeting Saul Raskin; here was a fine artist from Europe.

The most amazing tale of me is when I was in Rome, Italy, on the Furlough – 1946. I was walking by Saint Peter’s Church – where a troop of Swiss Guards armed with pikes wearing funny uniforms stopped me and said, “Today you must come in for the service.” I thanked them saying I was Jewish. But they showed...
me a letter from the Pope Pius XII to bring in American soldiers for the first United States citizen to be canonized by the Roman Catholic Church, Saint Frances Xavier (Mother Cabrini). A true story – they had me standing there by the Bernini altar where St. Peter is buried. Behind me were American nuns, the Pope on a big red chair carried by young priests blessed them. They all bowed their heads. I gave him a military salute, as I was in uniform a U.S. corporal – an American Jew!

We G.I. guards in the Nuremberg Prison guarded about 24 of those big Nazis who ran the Third Reich with their Führer, Adolf Hitler. We were told by our officers to get their autographs, which they bought from us. I also sold my sketches of them; Hermann Goering sold well! The army was good to us G.I.’s, gave us siddurs and Passover service rations. Nearby Munich was a D.P. camp – a displaced persons camp for Jewish people who came from the concentration camps. We, the U.S. Army, protected them and fed them. We gave them also army blankets and clothes – I gave them candy, which I bought from the Army Post Exchange (PX).

So I was exchanged for a Russian General and his men. The British let the train pass – first I was put on a British train going back to Vienna! There I went to Russian headquarters passing soldiers with bayonets to get passed. When I got to the Russian officer there who spoke English, he gave me a pass to go through their zone first. Asking me for cigarettes as he heard by telephone I had given some of his men Camels and Lucky Strike cigarettes. Well my first Sgt. had forgotten to give me one – so I was a prisoner all that night by the Soviet army – so the train took off. I was their prisoner. When they brought me in to their guard house they were smoking Machorka Russian type of cigarettes using newspapers and tobacco so I gave them American cigarettes. In appreciation of my cartons of cigarettes I gave them – I had bought them at the PX in order to sell on the black market – the Russians put me by their stove, gave me black bread and butter and tea – later the British called up. They had stopped a Russian train with troops.

I also saw on Mt. Carmel an Arab caravan with camels as they had pitched their tents. I meant to have coffee with them – the women do all the work – they just sit down, the men gossip all day and drink ahwa coffee.”

Drawn to synagogues all of his life, and firmly embedded in the street life of the Lower East Side of New York, Hilu visited every synagogue that he came upon in his travels. He recalls:

When I was stationed in France 1945 – I prayed at the Paris synagogue, which looked like Notre Dame Cathedral. There I met Jewish soldiers in British uniforms from Jewish troops from Palestine, now Israel. Believe it or not I saw in Bavaria Jewish synagogues with paintings on the wood walls – also a mikvah in Rothenberg – there were a few noble German scholars who saved these holy Jewish synagogues.

Hilu draws and paints with whatever materials are at hand. When he can afford them, he chooses traditional oil pastels from the legendary French firm Sennelier and the thick handmade paper from Fabriano. However, Hilu lives entirely on his Army pension and resorts to ordinary office paper, markers, and crayons. Many works are collaged with newspaper stories that relate to the drawings and most are ‘signed’ with adhesive mailing labels. He embraces his love of art and feels deeply influenced by Van Gogh, Dali, and Picasso.

Hilu’s interesting flow of memory moves repeatedly to past events, re-thinking them, re-living them, conflating them with recent world events. His agile memory is triggered by other artist’s works, by newspaper photographs, by articles in encyclopedias… and yet it is always his own authentic experience being strengthened and reinforced. The Nuremberg Prison and Trials are as alive today as they were 66 years ago. The Lower East Side throngs with Jews clutching prayer books, frequenting long-gone markets and vanished synagogues. Tales, legends, and imaginative midrash live in his outpouring of art.

Laura Kruger, Curator
Nathan Hilu was born in 1925 at 22 Essex Street on the Lower East Side, now Seward Park. Nathan’s grandfather, Hacham Bashi Nissim Andibo, was both a miller and a practicing (albeit unsalaried) rabbi, and Nathan refers to him proudly as the Chief Rabbi of Damascus. Deeply imbedded in the Damascus community, he conducted services from his home.

Nathan’s father, Leon (Aslan) Hilu, was born in 1900. Leon emigrated from Damascus, Syria, around 1918-21 due to financial hardship and the decline in Jewish businesses, which was caused by the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the increasing import of European goods. In addition, the ever constant threat of oppression and violence by the Muslim majority gave little hope for a peaceful future. Many Syrian Jews, among them one of Nathan’s uncles, immigrated to Palestine in 1922 with the assistance of HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) and settled in Haifa, prior to the creation of the Jewish state.

Leon Hilu moved his family, including his son Nathan and his brother Sam, to Pittsburgh after visiting his sister Regina, a 14-year-old mail-order bride, there. The occasion of her giving birth to twin sons had prompted them to attend the pidyon ha-ben (redemption of the first-born son) ceremony and they stayed on. Nathan’s parents were unable to bring up their sons in the Sephardic tradition since the Pittsburgh Jewish community was largely Ashkenazic. The two brothers and their siblings were educated at public schools, cheder, and the Hebrew Institute of Pittsburgh, funded by the Edgar G. Kaufmann family. The Irene Kaufman Settlement House, established by the Council of Jewish Women to promote spiritual and physical well-being, offered cultural programs, including art workshops, similar to those of the Educational Alliance in New York City.

As a child, Nathan grew up speaking Arabic. Very much a loner, art became another language for him and he expressed his thoughts and ideas continuously in the form of annotated drawings. One of Nathan’s childhood memories includes a cousin who prepared Syrian delicacies and sweets, such as modelach, poppy seed biscuits, and sold them from his truck. This may account for Hilu’s attraction to the bakeries of the Lower East Side.

Nathan is a veteran of World War II, having served with the rank of Corporal from 1945-1947 in Camp Gordon, Georgia; Camp Lucky Strike, France; Vienna, Austria; and Nuremberg, Germany. He served as a prison guard attached to the 6850th Internal Security Detachment, guarding high-ranking Nazi Party members, German military servicemen, and German government officials in the Nuremberg Prison while they awaited trial for their war crimes. He also served with the 540th Military Intelligence Platoon, 525th Military Intelligence Detachment, and 82nd Airborne Division in California, Louisiana, and Fort Bragg, North Carolina. He was stationed in Tokyo during the Korean War (1950-1955) as a Technical Sergeant with the 41st Counter Intelligence Corps Detachment. While in Japan, he created illustrations for several Japanese children’s books. Hilu served as Specialist Two during the period of the ‘Cold War.’

In 1991, following his military service, Nathan became a longtime employee of Bookazine, a New York company specializing in exporting magazines to Europe. Located on West 10th Street in Manhattan, he was befriended by the owners, the Kallman family. They brought him to the notice of the art book publisher, Harry N. Abrams, who encouraged him to continue drawing, supplied him with art materials, and introduced him to the works of Chagall, Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Dali.

Hilu’s work is included in the collections of The Explorer’s Club, NY; the Whittaker Gallery of the Educational Alliance, NY; the Harriet and Kenneth Kupferberg Holocaust Resource Center and Archives at the Queensborough Community College of Jewish Art; and The National Museum of American Jewish Military History, Washington, D.C.

Nathan Hilu Inside Nuremberg, published by Oksbooks, was co-authored by Steven B. Bowman, Professor of Judaic Studies at the University of Cincinnati.
Text on verso: My grandfather Hacham Bashi Nissim Andibo was the chief Rabbi of Damascus Syria. His title Hacham Bashi was the title given by Turkey who ruled Syria Ottoman Empire Turkish word Pasha – Prince?
Warsaw Ghetto Uprising
Oil pastel on paper, 16” x 20”

Text on verso: There was a Jewish man in Shushan the capital whose name was Mordechai. As Mordechai is the hero with Esther Purim against Haman the Amalekite so Mordechai and his wife Mira fought Hitler and his Nazis at the Warsaw uprising of the brave Jews. I as a veteran of WWII, Korean War, Cold War salute M. Anilewicz.

The Art of Papercutting
Mixed media collage, 20” x 16”
LEGENDS AND BIBLE

The Dibbuck
Oil pastel on paper, 27” x 30 ¼”
Courtesy of Herman Lowenhar

Jonah and the Big Fish
Marker on paper, 16” x 20”
Solomon at the Bottom of the Sea
Marker, crayon, on paper, 20” x 16”

Serach Tells Jacob that Joseph Is Alive
Oil pastel on paper, 25 ½” x 30 ¼”
Courtesy of Herman Lowenhar
The Rabbi Danced
Mixed media collage, 16” x 20”

Text on verso: When a bridal party passed by Rebbi Yehudah Ben Ila was teaching his students. He said come let us dance for joy for the bride and groom. He danced with a myrtle twig. See Rebbi Nosson D’Rebbi Ethics.

God Braiding Eve’s Hair
Marker, crayon, on paper, 20” x 16”

Text on verso: According to Rabbi Nathan Nosson D’Rebbi Avos when God created Chavah he braided her hair to be a beautiful bride a Kallah for Adam. The first groom in history that’s why we eat the braided Challah for the Sabbath.
Lower East Side

Shanah Tovah
Oil pastel on paper, 20” x 16”

Text on verso: On Rosh Hashanah 5770 and the Day of Atonement I am inspired to draw from memory this humble drawing. The Lower East Side where I live seems to dance with joy to serve G-d. From my window I see some wear tennis shoes, tallis and white costumes (kittel). It has become a custom not to wear leather as it was considered a luxury.

The Blue Rabbi
Oil pastel on paper, 23” x 30 ¼”
Courtesy of Herman Lowenhar
My Memories of the Nuremberg Trial and Prison
1945-1946
Mixed media collage, 18” x 12 ¾”

Text on verso: Guarded Hermann Goering, Franz Von Papen, Hjalmar Schacht, Robert Ley, Hans Fritzsche, Borman in absentia, Kaltenbruner, Rosenberg, Speer, Jodl, Keitel, Donitz, Raeder, etc. I was a U.S. Army G.I. guard at the Nuremberg Trial 1945-1946.
In honor of my mother and father

Prisoner’s Round
Marker on paper, 20” x 16”

1945-1946 We G.I. guards had our Nazi prisoners do the “Prisoner’s Round” in the gym of the Nuremberg Prison. I marched them.
PFC Nathan Hilu RA 33969598.
HOLIDAYS

Haman’s Humiliation
Oil pastel on paper, 22” x 30”
Courtesy of Herman Lowenhar

Prayers in the Style of Chagall
Oil pastel on paper, 24” x 25 ½”
Courtesy of Herman Lowenhar
### EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

*All works are from the collection of the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion Museum unless otherwise noted.*

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<thead>
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<th>Title</th>
<th>Medium and Size</th>
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<td>Spinoza the Philosopher</td>
<td>Oil pastel on paper, 20” x 16”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Troubadours</td>
<td>Mixed media collage, 16” x 20”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Farewell</td>
<td>Oil pastel on paper, 16” x 20”</td>
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<td>Chief Rabbi of Damascus</td>
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<td>The Art of Papercutting</td>
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<td>Liberation of Buchenwald</td>
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<td>Noah and His Family</td>
<td>Mixed media collage, 16” x 20”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jonah and the Big Fish</td>
<td>Marker on paper, 16” x 20”</td>
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<td>Solomon at the Bottom of the Sea</td>
<td>Marker, crayon, on paper, 20” x 16”</td>
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<tr>
<td>A Tale from Jerusalem</td>
<td>Marker, crayon, on paper, 16” x 20”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Came the Cat</td>
<td>Oil pastel on paper, 20” x 16”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Serach Tells Jacob that Joseph Is Alive</td>
<td>Oil pastel on paper, 25 ½” x 30 ¾”</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Dibbuck</td>
<td>Oil pastel on paper, 27” x 30 ¼”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Joy Cometh in the Morning</td>
<td>Oil pastel on paper, 27 ½” x 30 ¼”</td>
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<tr>
<td>How the Rabbi Ties His Shoes</td>
<td>Oil pastel on paper, 22 ¾” x 30 ¾”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pharaoh’s Dream</td>
<td>Mixed media collage, 28 ¼” x 21 ¾”</td>
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<td>Joseph Interprets Pharaoh’s Dream</td>
<td>Mixed media collage, 21 ¾” x 26 ¼”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mazel Tov Chelsea Clinton</td>
<td>Oil pastel on paper, 20 ½” x 24 ½”</td>
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<td>God Braiding Eve’s Hair</td>
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<td>Pidyon Ha Ben</td>
<td>Mixed media collage, 16” x 20”</td>
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<td>Shanah Tovah</td>
<td>Oil pastel on paper, 20” x 16”</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Kaddish</td>
<td>Oil pastel on paper, 20 ½” x 24 ½”</td>
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<td>The Blue Rabbi</td>
<td>Oil pastel on paper, 23” x 30 ¼”</td>
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<td>Chasm Sopher Synagogue</td>
<td>Mixed media collage, 24 ½” x 20 ½”</td>
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<td>Oil pastel on paper, 34” X 30”</td>
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<td>Warsaw Ghetto Uprising</td>
<td>Oil pastel on paper, 16” x 20”</td>
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<td>Erfurt Synagogue</td>
<td>Oil pastel on paper, 16” x 20”</td>
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<td>After They Were Hanged</td>
<td>Oil pastel on paper, 11” x 14”</td>
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<tr>
<td>My Memories of the Nuremberg Trial</td>
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<td>Prisoner’s Round</td>
<td>Marker on paper, 20” x 16”</td>
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<td>Hear This Frick</td>
<td>Oil pastel on paper, 20 ½” x 24 ½”</td>
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<td>Doctor Funk Minister of Economy</td>
<td>Marker, crayon, on paper, 16” x 20”</td>
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<td>Field Marshal Goering</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grand Admiral Raeder</td>
<td>Marker, crayon, on paper, 14” x 11”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evidence</td>
<td>Marker, crayon, on paper, 20 ½” x 24 ½”</td>
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<td>Esther</td>
<td>Oil pastel on paper, 16” x 20”</td>
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<td>20th Street Sabbath</td>
<td>Mixed media collage, 20” x 16”</td>
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<td>Prayers in the Style of Chagall</td>
<td>Oil pastel on paper, 24” x 25 ½”</td>
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<td>Scapegoat</td>
<td>Oil pastel on paper, 22 ¼” x 25”</td>
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<td>Sukkot</td>
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<td>My Mother’s Grave</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ephemera</td>
<td>Kilroy Was Here Nuremberg Trial 1945-1946  Mixed media collage, 12 ½” x 18”</td>
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<td>My Memories of the Nuremberg Trial and Prison 1945-1946  Mixed media collage, 18” x 12 ¾”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>I am Korean War Veteran</td>
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<td>My Drawings of the Nuremberg Trial</td>
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