

## **Art is a Bridge Between Cultures**

**By Leann Holt**

The New Mexico Jewish Link

It is easy enough to say Lia Lynn Rosen is an innovative artist and educator who specializes in ceramics.

That is evidenced by the work she has produced over the past 25 years. Her pieces have been shown from Los Angeles to New York City. Her art workshops have inspired and enriched children from the pueblos of New Mexico to the women of Philadelphia.

But to define Lia Lynn Rosen only as an artist and educator would not accurately reflect what she is about. She wants to contribute more than that.

Rosen is fluent in Hebrew and wants to help people learn the language. She is passionate about reaching marginalized people with art. She cares about incorporating art into all areas of Jewish life, including ritual ceremony. She hopes to organize and empower Jewish women through art. She wants to teach people how to use art to narrate their personal stories.

Certainly a tall agenda. But when you look into Rosen's eyes, you see a fierce determination and a fire that lets you know she will never stop trying to impact her world.

Rosen grew up in the Midwest, the daughter of a painter and a computer science pioneer. Her family lived in Israel during Rosen's bat mitzvah year. Rosen says her acquisition of the Hebrew language while in Israel helped awaken her Jewish identity.

When she returned to Wisconsin during her high school years, Rosen began to explore the arts. She went on to study at Iowa's South Bear School of Pottery, learning the clean lines of the Bauhaus school.

She eventually met Dr. J. J. Brody, an innovative historian of Native American art, and came to New Mexico to study ancestral pueblo pottery with him. She learned from the painted pottery designs of the ancient Mimbres people, and watched traditional pueblo potters take clay — the soil from which the Bible says human beings were made — and fashion beautiful things for daily use. These ancient ways impacted her own art and teaching.

In 1998, Rosen went to New York's Teachers College and earned a masters degree in art education. She became involved with an exhibition called "*Jewish Artists: On the Edge*," which broadened her concept of Jewish art.

And to top it all off, somewhere along the way, Rosen was attracted to design elements used by North African Berber women. It all makes for an interesting mix that is not easily defined.

Like small pieces of tile that make up a mosaic, each of these influences in Rosen's life contributes to the art she creates. The Hebrew language, African women, Native American storytelling, all are pieces of tile that, when brought together as a cohesive whole, create something wonderfully unique and meaningful.

Rosen sees the cultural combinations in her art as significant because they build bridges between cultures. "In the cultural arts, Jews are bridge makers", Rosen said. And for Rosen, those bridges extend to people who do not normally have access to the arts.

Rosen has taught art to youth at risk at the Youth Diagnostic and Development Center. Rosen sees her work with the teens as part of the prophetic mandate of *tikkun olam* — repairing the universe. "When these kids are doing art," Rosen says, "the room becomes the most peaceful corner of Albuquerque."

She calls it "narrative art" or "art as process." It is a way for these troubled young people to express themselves, make sense out of loss and grapple with life's issues. It is a way for them to move back to the basic elements of the earth and let it speak to them.

Always looking for new forms of personal expression, Rosen has been exploring other art mediums — paper, cloth, weaving. Her home and studio are a reflection of these new ventures, as well as a view into just how many different tiles make up the mosaic that is her art.

A woman's tallis she designed has prayers, the tree of life and Shaddai, a Hebrew name for God, inscribed on it. A weaving she did on a primitive loom has a North African feel. A paper collage shows two of her worlds — New Mexico and New York — juxtaposed.

"Clay is one of the materials I have had a very long covenant with, but it is not the only place to channel my energy," Rosen said. "Most artists have several media they are fluent with."

But no matter what the medium, almost every piece reflects her Jewish roots in some way.

"(Judaism) is a point of view," Rosen said. "It's part of what comes out, because it's

part of me. There's a piece of social justice, a piece of creating a place for women in Judaism, a piece of appreciating arts in a verbally based culture."

But once again, there is not a simple label for Rosen. Although she draws from the Jewish tradition to create challah and seder plates, she creates things as unique as personal blessing shields with prayers for healing on them, and mezuzot to hold individually chosen blessings.

Although she appreciates traditional Jewish ceremony, Rosen says she would like to "transform the (Jewish) ceremonial world" through art. "There needs to be a tikkun on Judaism," Rosen said.

"The way communication is focused now (for Jewish people) is mainly the written word. "We need to take the visual and add it to the verbal. I would like to see the Jewish view be that art is central to the culture."

"The Torah is poetry. Rabbis use theater with ritual objects as props. Services are performance art," she said.

She envisions meaningful, modern ceremonial objects that address the fears, struggles and hopes of contemporary Jews. She also sees new prayers being written that reflect common struggles. And if a transformation of the ceremonial world could happen anywhere, it could certainly happen in New Mexico.

"Judaism in New Mexico is an interesting experiment," Rosen said. "It is an unusual place to 're-create the vessel' because you're starting with a blank canvas. No one is saying 'you can't do it that way'."

One thing is certain — New Mexico is a richer place because of innovative people like Rosen. Artists like her not only provide beautiful things for the eye, but they can help us discover ourselves. And maybe —just maybe — art like Rosen's can help us build bridges to somewhere we have never been before.

In May 2008, Rosen completed a year as Arts Fellow at the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education in NYC. She served as Rosh Omanut at the Reconstructionist summer camp summer of 2009. Currently, she works in her studio creating commissions for a national audience, and is available for group workshops integrating prayer, arts and *tikkun olam*. She can be reached at [liarosen@earthlink.net](mailto:liarosen@earthlink.net), by phone at [505-262-4801](tel:505-262-4801), or visit her webpage @[ClayKodesh.com](http://ClayKodesh.com).