

ELLEN FRANK: And the Illumination Arts Atelier

By Joanne Pilgrim

In a modest house alongside Three Mile Harbor, Ellen Frank tackles some high-minded ideas: world peace, ancient cultures, and the potential for art to lift and enlighten the human spirit.

A painter, writer, and scholar, Ms. Frank has for the last decade or so been creating manuscripts and other pieces that incorporate gold, copper, and silver leaf in a modern interpretation of illuminated artwork.

The art of illumination, rendering sacred documents, she noted, has been traditional for centuries in a variety of cultures and societies. "Illuminations have a whole life to them," she said: "the relationship between the illumination, the scribe or the calligrapher, the use of image, the use of the text, the commentary around the text, the commentary around the art."



Carissa Katz

To revitalize interest in the art, she founded the not-for-profit Ellen Frank Illumination Arts Foundation in June 2004. She then went on to found the Illumination Atelier, which draws interns from around the world who come to learn how to apply precious metal leaf.

She hopes the modern expression of the art form will "build public awareness and appreciation of the creative process behind the ancient works," according to a brochure, "while preserving the techniques for future generations of artists."

Ms. Frank and her students have been preparing for an exhibit of "Cities of Peace," a series of illuminated paintings designed to honor the history and culture of cities worldwide that have experienced major conflict and trauma. The paintings portray Jerusalem, Baghdad, Kabul, Beijing, Hiroshima, New York, and Lhasa. "The art is meant to celebrate these cities, and to honor their people," Ms. Frank said.

The series was sparked by a visit to Jerusalem six years ago, when, said Ms. Frank, "I could feel the tension in the air." She has not visited all the cities the paintings depict, however. "It can't be that I have to go to each place to have my humanity alive," she said.

"My humanity is compassion and understanding." Understanding, Ms. Frank hopes and believes, is a prerequisite to peace.

The works incorporate images based on historic events, ancient motifs, artistic traditions in manuscripts, tapestries, carvings, and metal work, as well as architectural shapes, cultural traditions, city maps, poems, and myths. Extensive research is conducted in consultation with scholars and institutions

around the world. "All the work has many layers," said Ms. Frank.

The elements of "Hiroshima: Winter Bloom" are laid over a depiction of an aerial photograph taken by the United States military before the atomic bomb was dropped. A symbolic, winter-blooming plum blossom sweeps across the top.

"Baghdad: City of Peace, Truly" is bordered by a pattern taken from the Al-Kadhimain mosque, a Shi'ite shrine that has been damaged in the war. Cuneiform text in the painting tells the earliest creation myth, from 3000 B.C. The title refers to the city's former name, which meant "city of peace."

In "New York: This is My City!" that phrase is written in 50 languages. "Lhasa: 10 Directions" uses mudras, which are sacred hand positions, as a border pattern and contains a sixth-century poem.

Each piece is 69 by 104 inches on Belgian linen. Different types of gold leaf - 22-karat "moon gold," 12-karat white gold, and palladium leaf - are used, along with mica and bronze powders, and with egg tempera paint. A smooth clay ground is applied to the linen to hold large areas of gold leaf. Every painting has a small area of crimson leaf to honor the dead.

"We're transforming anguish into beauty," Ms. Frank said. "It's not recreating the pain - it's meant for us to face the anguish and experience it transformed, or transforming."

"We each have our own personal history, we have our collective history, we have our history as human beings. On a personal level, we need to transform our personal anguish into health, generosity, compassion. As a people, we need to do that, as a nation, and as human beings."

With the interns' ideas and hands-on work, the paintings "are like choreography," said Ms. Frank, who considers herself the "artistic director" of the project. But, she added, "there are things only my hands can do."

"We have a little microcosm of world peace right here. It is such an honor for me to know these people," she said of the interns, all of whom receive credit for their work.

The first overseas participants arrived in May from South Korea. A Japanese intern stayed on to help with research. There are interns from Colombia, Poland, Estonia, and Texas now. Each stays at least a month; several have worked on the project for four months, and some stay as long as a year.

So far, more than a dozen have come after learning about the atelier on the Internet. The interns are provided with room and board and stay, several at a time, in the Springs house that Ms. Frank shares with her husband, the composer Stephen Dickman. The work is produced in a studio there.

"Jerusalem: A Painting Toward Peace," the first in the "Cities of Peace" series, took one year to complete. Six more works were produced with the help of the atelier interns in six months.

Another project in which the Illumination Arts Foundation and the atelier are involved is the completion of "Hanukkah Illuminated: A Book of Days." On this "Hagaddah for Hanukkah," Ms. Frank is collaborating with Everett Fox, a biblical scholar and translator.

For "The Illuminated King Arthur," original illuminations for the stories of King Arthur, precious materials such as gold leaf are being hand-applied to printed facsimiles of original King Arthur pieces, then sold as the "King Arthur Suite."

This week, two of the illuminated "Cities of Peace" works leaned against walls in Ms. Frank's living room waiting for pickup, while an intern and a Bridgehampton artist-volunteer carefully applied gold leaf to the steps of the

Potala palace in the "Lhasa" work.

The workshop is "based on the Renaissance atelier concept," where the pieces that are produced show "the hand of the painter, the master, and the hand of the students," Ms. Frank explained. In the future, she hopes to find property on which to build a residence hall and workshop space for the atelier and its students.

The atelier has attracted the attention of donors, some of whom have underwritten the cost of gold leaf for a piece. The filmmaker Don Lenzer is working on a documentary about the project.

Ms. Frank was a professor of English literature and aesthetic theory at the University of California at Berkeley, "so I bring this whole literary background to painting," she said. "The love of language, words, the love of ideas, and interest in history is ever-present in the work."

In 1980, she published "Literary Architecture: Essays Toward a Tradition," an exploration of the "relationship between language, memory, consciousness, and architecture." "When I finished the book it dropped me in the lap of painting," she said. She left Berkeley to paint full time in 1978 and moved to East Hampton in the early 1980s. "The early paintings were about going silent," Ms. Frank said, "about an awareness that was beyond language. In the last 10 years, language has figured prominently."

Her paintings have been exhibited in solo and group shows throughout the world, and are in corporate and private collections here and abroad. "The Chance Encounter," an 84-foot mural of 7-to-12-foot panels incorporating gold, silver, and copper leaf, and depicting an original story, is on display in the lobby of the Sheraton Long Island in Hauppauge.

Ms. Frank studied art history at Yale and has a master's degree in English literature and a doctorate in English literature and the visual arts, both from Stanford University. She has been recognized for her scholarship and painting with Fulbright and Ford Foundation fellowships, as well as with grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York Foundation for the Arts, and the Pollock-Krasner Foundation.

Tonight, there will be a preview of a "Cities of Peace" exhibit at the Laurie M. Tisch Gallery at the Jewish Community Center in Manhattan, to which a number of officials, including President Bill Clinton, the Dalai Lama, and the head of peacekeeping at the United Nations, have been invited.

The exhibit will open to the public on Nov. 17 with a talk by Ms. Frank at 6:30 p.m. and an opening reception from 7 to 8:30 p.m. The artist hopes to send the work off on an international tour.

The atelier may then set its hand to works based on more cities that have seen strife, of which, unfortunately, there is a long list. Monrovia, Sarajevo, Hanoi, Dresden, Beirut, Seoul, and Warsaw have been suggested.

"It's my life's work," Ms. Frank said. "This is everything for me on the spiritual level, on a political level, and in the sense of Ellen Frank as a citizen of the world. This is about life and death and war and peace. And then it's art, and it's love."