



MASSACHUSETTS CULTURAL COUNCIL
FOLK & TRADITIONAL ARTS PROGRAM

AUDIO TAPE LOG

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Brief summary of tape contents:

How Fagin first got involved with manuscript illumination, had requests for ketubah which became commercial opportunity for her, definition of ketubah as legal contract, description of s ketubah in "Keepers of Tradition" exhibition which is hers and husbands, discussion of illumination – application of gold leaf onto paper, talks about "Beyond Genocide" series in which she uses illuminated manuscript to explore legacy of people affected by genocide, Armenian genocide, use of Marash embroidery, needle lace, and Church of Ani, Ethiopia, Cambodia, dealing with the raw, open wound of genocide, price of ketubah, Jewish Holocaust, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Afghanistan, Buddhist India, Bangladesh, China, Japan, the Crusades and the Inquisition, Congo.

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| | Interview with Amy Fagin in New Salem, MA |
| | MH: It is October 10, 2008 and we are at the studio of Amy Fagin in New Salem, MA to talk to you about your work with illuminated manuscript. You already told us this, but tell us again where you were born and raised. |
| | AF: I was born in Boston, MA and I am a Massachusetts native. |
| | MH: So you're known for your work in illuminated manuscripts. I want to learn- I want to get to the Ketubah, but I want to just sort of go back in your life... and tell us how you got into this whole field because it's pretty unusual. |
| | AF: Well let's see. It's really sort of a magic fairy tale story. As an artist, I made a series of decisions to make a commitment to make a living as a fine artist. And two components that I had in mind was that I wanted to be an artist and if I was going to be an artist I wanted to make a living as an artist. And I did not have a formal education in fine arts outside of my own interests |

which started in childhood. But after I was finished with graduate school I started exploring my interests in art and just exploring everything. And settled on interior decorative painting which included floor clothes and furniture restoration and stenciling and wall treatments. And... just explored that for a while because it was a practical way to be an artist and make a living and at the same time, certainly study all kinds of art history... and became fascinated with the illuminated manuscript...and literally had an epiphany. And a little fairy basically came over to me and *bing*, you know, magic wand, not verbally, but that was the level of draw, that recognition, that oh my goodness, this is what I know I can do. And it was as simple as that. So I simply started exploring the terrain of manuscript illumination. The history and creating pieces that would move me ahead. And at the same time, there was an increasing interest in the Ketubah, which is this beautiful ceremonial art that is 2,500 years old and has been practiced continuously for that length of time. And I had a couple of requests from friends to make these illuminations for me and that's how I got started commercially. So it just really expanded from there. And I'm very diligent and very organized and very disciplined so I've always had that advantage in terms of focusing my energy.

MH: Back to the Ketubah, which is a very, very ancient tradition... prenuptial agreement? Tell us what it is. What is this?

AF: It is a legal contract, and in its earliest stages, which are... I think some of the first Ketubas have been found roughly around 500 B.C.... but the first illuminated Ketubahs date back to 2,500 years. So, there's about a 500 year gap, if I did the math right there.... There's about a 500 year gap between the first written contract and the contracts that were created with decoration. And they've been practiced, every single generation, at every point in Jewish history.... You'll find an example of a Ketubah, if it's survived. So, I'm carrying on this unbelievable tradition.

MH: And once a couple is married, it's usually displayed in the home?

AF: Typically, typically, You know it has such a varied history and Jewish communities have had different relationships with the greater community, that it hasn't always been advised to advertise your marriage... so they were folded up or secured... you know, the basic tenant is... it's the contract that binds you legally under Jewish law. So, it was handled more as a legal contract. But different periods of history have different flowering of using these contracts as decorative art forms also.

MH: So the one that's in the exhibition currently...could you tell us a little about that one?

AF: That's mine. That's my ketubah that I made with my husband. I mean, I did all of the work but we designed it together. The symbolism in it is fairly simple. It's actually created in an angular format. It's a parallelogram and the language is written on an angle and the adornment is a Native American poem. A Tiwa Indian poem that my husband had given to me very early on in our courtship. We were breaking up and he gave me this poem and it totally turned me around. It's like a creed that I really live by on a day to day basis. And it basically talks about living with honor and living with enough dignity that you worthy of the life that you're living- in so many words. So that's on there, and the traditional conservative contract with the Lieberman clause which is an offshoot of the original orthodox contract, which does allow men and women to seek divorce if they needed to. It's really a modern, Women's Lib contract. So that's on there, and then there's some visual symbols. There's two birds. One symbolizing me, one symbolizing Wayne and the three jewels into the corners and the number three which is a symbol of growth... so symbolism in that piece is pretty simple.

MH: The illumination- is this using gold leaf or paper, or what do you use?

AF: Well the word "illumination" was coined in the 12th Century to describe the application of gold leaf onto paper which became a part of the scribe's tools that they would use to make books. And it's been extrapolated to include the entire genre... so it's a term that originated with just that one technique but now it really describes the whole genre.

MH: Tell us- there's a piece right to the side of us that's framed- a beautiful piece. Can you tell us about this?

AF: Well that piece is the second in the series that I'm completing that's entitled "Beyond Genocide" where I use the illuminated manuscript to explore the terrain of the history of genocide and the legacy of the people that were- that these terrible crimes were committed against. At some point in my career, in practice as a manuscript illuminator, just simply as I explained to you before, I reached a level of maturity where I was able to sort of draw in all of the tools where I could research in history, understand how to look at a whole group of people and how to express their identity through this incredible sacred art form. And so this piece here looks at the Armenian genocide, which was a mass atrocity which occurred, beginning in 1915 and roughly 1.5 Armenians were either executed or run into the desert by the Ottoman/Turkish regime or empire towards the end of that empire. And the composition itself is based on two artifacts that I had researched in Armenian history. And just to back up a tiny bit- when I start looking at how to create an illumination, I look at the atrocity and then I go all the way back to the beginning of the history of the people. And some of these atrocities are modern... in this case, it's one of the first, or the first of the 20th Century. But the Armenian people's history dates back to the 3rd Century A.D. So, they've got a long history and a very strong religious identity. So the composition is based on both the beautiful folk craft of "tatting" or, which you have an example of-

MH: The Marash embroidery and then you're right- the needle lace...

AF: And also, the footprint of the Church of Ani- which is one of the first churches that was built in this area of the World. And just in terms of the detail you know in the center there's the representational imagery, which is a view of Mount Ararat, and Mount Ararat is the sacred place or location that Armenians identify with. In fact, Noah's Arc landed right around here. You can find it right in the Old Testament. And the Church structures are all... based on the actual churches. This is the Ichmiadzen, which is one of the first churches that was built... I believe it was 309 A.D. And these images here, of these people wandering out of their villages, is actually a rendering taken from a photography legacy that was taken by a German photographer Arman Webner, who really risked his life to document the evacuations of the villagers from their villages. So these are actual renderings of the people. And I did get permission from his estate to use this work. And if you look around this center section this is a portion of the Armenian bible, which was translated from the Greek bible... one of the origins of the identity of the people was the formulation of the language in the 4th Century. And one of the first books that they translated was the bible. And this is from the Old Testament. And the story that it tells is _____ (dawn showing?) because it is a description of what these people are going through and it talks about your bones being crushed by oppressors inflicting atrocity on you day after day. And it's a cry- it's from the book of lamentations, which is amazing in that it reverberates from a 2,000 year old document to the Armenian people to what happened today. Further outside, the little ceramic decorative elements of women that look like they're pregnant is based on a beautiful folk craft of making salt jars. So these are actually very popular in 19th and 20th Century Armenia and I use that design shape. Inside of the bellies of the pregnant women are these cross shapes and these cross shapes are based on another historic artifact from this part of the world called a _____ (hutch car?), and what is so profound about how the composition evolved is that these women have pregnant bellies and these are all Christian children and it's the Christian Armenians that were targeted. So it's very powerful.

MH: And this figure? The hand?

AF: The hand is based on a reliquary object that was found in one of the churches that is the symbol of peace. And I did hear a tale and I did call the Armenian museum and library to find out more information about the detail of the hand and they did tell me that the priest's hands were cut off as a part of the terrorist campaign that was waged against them. I just heard that tale.

I don't know whether that's true or not. It does work nicely into the story. But that's how a composition evolves. And that's one of-

MH: This whole series. And so the original of this is where?

AF: Right over there... And I'm not going to display the originals until the whole series is finished.

MH: And what process do you describe that again, about... let's say you've finished an original and you're going to reproduce it... how's that done?

AF: Well this is a giclee reproduction. So I finish the master and I have it scanned professionally, get a digital file, pop it into my computer, if I have to treat it at all just to get it to be accurate colors otherwise... and then I make a print.

MH: That's a big print though.

AF: Yep, well that's full scale. That's the size of the piece. I have a 44 inch printer, so I try to limit my work to 24 inch... that's as wide as I'm gonna go with these. And you know at some point when work is finished, I'd like to create a book. And then, you know we'd shrink 'em down.

MH: And you were talking about heritage?

AF: Well these are the ketubahs I was telling you about that I've been creating for so many years... I've developed a really nice collection. So the collection has fallen into three categories. I have a contemporary category which is really my trademark and right now you can see here I'm just starting composition on an original commission which will eventually be a print. So, you know it's a really basic composition. It's called double ring but it's got a really nice orbital heavenly kind of you know feel to it, which a lot of my work does. I'm just starting with the pentagraph and I'll fill in with the color later and then this piece here is based on the heritage series, which I look at either explicitly or metaphorically a part of Jewish history. So in this case, I had the opportunity to travel to Serejevo, Bosnia, Herzegovina, a couple of years ago... and this design is based on a beautiful embroidery that I had found on a wall on display. So it's a fairly simple composition but when I create the pieces and put the text inside I will give the couple that purchases the ketubah a little bit of the history of that part of the world. So this one... (audio is a bit fuzzy for a couple of sentences)

MH: You've been doing this for many years. About how many ketubahs have you done?

AF: Roughly thousands.

MH: And how would people find you?

AF: I have a series of galleries all around the country that represent me, I also have a website... so a couple things...

MH: But this you're saying is your commercial work and the other you're saying is your fine art work?

AF: It's all fine art, but the genocide project is such a big commitment and requires an enormous amount of research to genuinely represent people that at the beginning I know nothing about and I want to make sure that I pay tribute to these people who suffered so much. You can't play around with that kind of responsibility. So, with 25 compositions and 3 to 6 months worth of research, to even just figure out the composition, it's a lifelong commitment. So add up like commitment. So, I've been able to put them on display... I started the exhibition work in 2005, I had four pieces finished. Every time I finish a piece, as soon as I get enough money together, I frame it and when I have the energy, I'll find a grant, put the exhibition together... it's really grown above and beyond what I myself have done. But I just want to show you, I got two other examples of other genocide pieces just so you can have a chance to peek at them. These are little renderings-

MH: It looks Ethiopian-

AF: Yep, that's right. How'd you know that?

MH: Because I met an Ethiopian iconographer.

AF: Oh you're kidding!

C. W. S. P. P. R. G. O. S. E. Y.

MH: No. I mean, he does Ethiopian iconography and his name is _____ (audio gets fuzzy)

AF: That is incredible! Well it's absolutely based on the history... Ethiopia had a huge portion of its history that was devoted to manuscript illuminations. Hundreds of years.

MH: Well it looks Celtic too...

AF: I didn't read about any connection... the neat thing about this particular illumination which was a big challenge and you wouldn't necessarily know it to look at it was finding this Amarek poetry based on the oral history of the _____ district... I just happened- I searched and searched and searched for Amarek writing and I had really luckily found this one book, it's almost impossible to find anything in Amarek in this country... I had to go to the Smithsonian and they won't let them go...

MH: And did you hand letter them?

AF: Yes. And this part of the composition is based on some of the metallic staffs that are very very popular in processional ritual activities. And it's based on piece of metal work. So I used the decoration for that and the four saints... this is umm- oh I can't remember the names- I can't remember the names off the top of my head. But saint worship and reverence is very important. This is Queen Shibe, Mary is one of the more modern Islamic saints and these guys are just based on illuminations that I found and one of the things about the atrocity that was so prevalent that is so similar to the Zimbabwe issue that you were talking about was politicicide. So, the political components of _____ were mostly the young elite. And they were either murdered and stacked up on the side of the road, or they had to flee their country. So it was really the future of the entire country...

MH: So have you done the _____

AF: In Cambodia, yes. Cambodia was the third piece that I finished. That's downstairs on the fridge. I can show you a small piece. And this one is of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Which is not really, doesn't fall under the category in the sense that it wasn't a group of people that were targeted for elimination because of religious, ethnic, or...

MH: No, it's just war.

AF: Exactly, but the weapon was the subject matter. And the fact that absolute annihilation could happen in a fraction of a second was a turning point for humanity. So I really felt like I had to look at it carefully. And the composition is based on... it's a very abstract composition. And it's based on the remnants of a movie theatre where just the iron shell- the melted iron shell remained... and so this portion of the composition is based on that and then there were lots of eye witness testimonies of what the bomb looked like. And I found this gorgeous, small piece of Japanese embroidery with essentially this design that looked like what the descriptions were. And so that's how that played into that. And the rendering of the floating river is basically the concept of renewal. Because if you go to Hiroshima or Nagasaki today they're thriving cities. And they were obliterated. Within a two mile radius, nothing survived. And the poem is written by a survivor, who... it's a very gruesome poem that basically talks about her experience shoveling the dead bodies, being exposed to radioactivity... it's really ugly... so I wanted that contrast between-

MH: How do you deal with- I mean your art is dealing with such ugliness- How do you get by?

AF: Well it makes a lot of sense. Aside from my visual devotion to this work I also talk with people who doing all kinds of aspects of genocide policy, education, prevention, and you know it's still a raw open wound. And this really is incredible healing because it looks at- with total sympathy- not sentimentality, real sympathy for what this group of people would have wanted to say to you if they were able to tell you, "This is what happened to me. This is what I want to explain" And you know, there's a real leap of faith there, you know as the whether me, who has never lived through this kind of experience, and who really doesn't know what it would have been like to go through that... you know I'm hoping I can really make that gap and help somebody else who doesn't have that knowledge of the history of these people...

MH: And have you shared this with an Ethiopian, or an Armenian-

AF: I would not dare put the calligraphy down there without all kinds of scholarly-

MH: No, I didn't mean that. I meant do they- how does it feel them, to see-

AF: I think that people are just amazed. You know, every one of the atrocities is so different, and people come from different walks of life.... If I had the opportunity to speak with a survivor on one level or another- whether it's interviewing them the way you're interviewing me to learn more about their life... it's really hard to say. I think that every individual brings their own life experience to these things, and most people are so grateful that I'm even doing this... because a lot of these stories... who do you know who knows about the Ethiopian massacres of the 1970s and 1980s? And I'm learning all the time too. I'm not a historian, so it's a challenge for me to even convey the information... you know, the one saint, the name doesn't come to the forefront of my mind... but it's all there in the panels and people can sort of take and leave whatever they want.

MH: And did you have art training? Did you go to art school?

AF: No, I didn't. I'm self taught. But I told you... the little fairy that came right up and *bonk*. I want be a manuscript illuminator. And I literally- that was it. That little epiphany happened and I've been totally devoted for almost thirty years now. So that's the story of ketubas and genocide pieces.

(brief conversation)

AF: You know, the one thing that I'm hoping... because I started out as a lay person with no knowledge of any of these atrocities, that the trajectory and commitment that I've made, I can shorten someone else's learning curve. And it's the visceral part... it's like- imagine being a kid from Uganda, somewhere where you don't speak English- are they going get it? I really want somebody who doesn't know anything about these people- I just them to be able to get it. So the text panel is going to be translated into any language. You know, you can sort of size it up or down, educationally. I'm sure it will have its whirlwind tour at some point in time. It's getting out there.

KS: Now, Gentiles- do they get Ketubahs done?

AF: Well the Ketubah itself is a document that follows Jewish Law. So if you're not Jewish, technically you're not going to buy a ketubah. But there's so much incredible interest in the art form that I definitely have people from all walks of life-

KS: That's what I was wondering, aesthetically, people are drawn to it...

AF: And I do sell non-traditional ketubah and wedding contracts

KS: What is the price range of these?

AF: Well the prints are \$250, it's \$65 for us to personalize them. So I have a little series of international vows.

(brief conversation)

AF: Up until the 14th Century, one person did not make this beautiful, illuminated books.

Someone did the painting, someone did the figures, someone did the landscapes. Someone did the calligraphy. Someone did the gessoing, someone did the gold leafing... I wouldn't probably have been the calligrapher. I'm using it as a modern art. You explore people who do traditional art. This is a traditional art but I am totally committed to making it a modern art. Because we've advanced-

****[Side Two]****

MH: Well absolutely. I just interviewed this letterpress printer who is still casting type in metal. He's using all the traditional- but there's all different ways of going about it- keeping some things and not others.

AF: But it's that power of the sacred... we very, very little *really* approach sacred... we get glimpses of it when you're standing in front of a magnificent landscape... even when it comes to art objects, when you have that sacred intent... it makes you step back, and say "Ok, who was this huge group of people?" And you get some little glimpse as to what does it mean when a million people are murdered?

MH: I'm really curious to see your Holocaust- your Jewish Holocaust-

AF: That's my next one. I just finished Hiroshima and Nagasaki- I have the portfolio (retrieves the portfolio), just so you can see the window- So, I finished Afghanistan, Armenia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Crusades and Inquisition, the DRC, Ethiopia, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, so I'm just starting to look at the Holocaust now. So here's Afghanistan- I won't go into all of the detail. But here's a funny story. I've been able to work with an Anthropologist at Williams College who specializes in Afghan history, and he gave me this book that he wrote, called "Before the Taliban". And He was in Afghanistan right in that era when the Mujahadeen were uprising against the Soviet forces, and he's got this picture of an Afghan with a big red beard, who's holding a sword... he looks exactly like this guy. And this is a relic from the Greek era where Alexander the Great sort of traipses through this whole region and left Greek garrisons. And this is a bronze- a detail of a bronze sculpture from a Seder plate(?), so it's just so funny how these things reverberate through history. A

KS: This looks like Hindu-

AF: Well, Buddhist India between the 7th- the 3rd and the 10th Century, was all- manifested itself in most of that part of the world- you should have heard of the Buddhists of Bania- those big two hundred foot sculptures. Oh they were a world heritage site. In Afghanistan. They're called Buddhas of Banian. Banian Valley is a valley in Afghanistan that had a Buddhist monastic center. And these 200 foot, low leaf carved figures were in the face of a mountain, and they were obliterated by the Taliban... took them a week to bomb these. It would be like bombing the statue of liberty- this is a whole era of Afghan history. (Returning to her piece) This looks at the Mongol invasions in 12th, 13th century, and also modern invasion, but the Soviet Union originally. I won't go into more detail with that one. So you saw the Armenia, and this one looks at Bangladesh in 1971. Bangladesh was East Pakistan. And after the western Pakistani army did a 130 day massacred where 400,000 women were raped and 10 million refugees later, it became a nation. And this history goes back a couple of thousand of years. All the way back to the beginning of the Buddhist era. And this is Cambodia. One caveat is this beautiful little black and white photographs, or rendering of photographs, came from the Tulsilang (?) prison- which was the biggest prison and torture center in Phenom Penh. It was an elementary School. They took pictures of the people who came into the prison, and I think only 7 people survived out of the 147,000 who were incarcerated there. And then this one looks at China. 100 years of Chinese history after the fall of the last emperor in 911 and the rise of the communists and nationalist forces, and the Japanese invasion, where you probably heard of the rape of Nan King (?) You can see these women down there- the detail. What's very powerful about this particular illumination is when you sort of first look at it, it looks very lovely, and as you sort of dig in, there's a lot of gruesome scenes there. But the Japanese were merciless. They estimate up to 70 million people in China were killed during that 100 year period. And this is based on the analects of Confucius, and it's basically like the Golden rule, and it basically says, don't do to others what you don't want forced upon you. The Confucian ideology permeates Chinese culture. And this looks at the Crusades and the Inquisition. And this is the story of Kane and Abel, told both in the Old Testament and the Koran. They're so detailed, it takes a half hour to look at all of the choices that I made to express the atrocity. This is the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which had two big periods of history when people were killed for one reason or another. There was the Belgian era, when King Leopold was responsible for the death of approximately 10 million Congolese and then the era of _____ (Moko), which was a thirty year reign of terror where he claimed the rest of the resources of that area. So it's a very modern piece, and there is still a lot of conflict in that area.

(brief unrelated conversation)