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## Books: Children and Art

Rahel Musleah

[Mousterpiece](#) by Jane Breskin Zalben (Roaring Brook/Macmillan)

At first glance, nothing especially “Jewish” jumps out from the pages of Jane Breskin Zalben’s [Mousterpiece](#) a picture book dubbed a “mouse-sized guide to modern art.” Except for the fact that author/illustrator Zalben is Jewish herself, no Magen Davids or menoras hide behind the easels or decorate the walls of the museum Janson the mouse explores every night. Inspired by what she sees, Janson begins to paint, creating delightful parodies of some of the most famous works of modern art. There is her face on a Campbell’s soup can, her Pollock-spattered canvas, her Van Gogh swirls shaping a mouse face, and her floating rodent amidst Dalian clouds.

Without any “isms” involved, Zalben gracefully introduces young children to pointillism, cubism, surrealism, abstract expressionism and more. By the story’s end, Janson discovers her own style, emphasizing the importance of “finding what makes you who you are, deep inside, and sticking to it,” according to Zalben. To boot, Janson gets an exhibition of her own.

Zalben named her little mouse after H.W. Janson, whose *History of Art* was the “Bible” Zalben used in college. The list of artists and brief bios that follows the story—“Janson’s Favorite Artists —” may as well read “Jane’s Favorite Artists.” These are the artists Zalben herself grew up with from the age of 5, when she began taking art lessons at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art. Today, with more than 50 books to her credit, the Long Island resident felt empowered enough to “take on the big guys in the art world.”

Zalben does not mention religious backgrounds in the bios—the language of art is universal—but several of the artists are Jewish or have Jewish connections, and their influence on the art world was substantial. Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein, raised in New York’s Upper West Side to a family of German Jewish background, based his imagery on cartoons and comic strips. Latvian-born Abstract Expressionist Mark Rothko (born Marcus Rothkowitz) was raised in an Orthodox, Zionist home and attended heder before his family emigrated to Portland, Oregon, to escape the Cossacks. His early experiences of anti-Semitism colored the direction of his work—some of which grappled with the Holocaust—but he moved through different styles before reaching his signature rectangles of lush color.

Artists who left Germany when the Nazis closed the Bauhaus in 1933 included Josef Albers (his wife Anni was Jewish), Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee. (Albers’s flat squares of color inspired the cover and first spread of [Mousterpiece](#).) Kandinsky drew upon Bible stories including Noah’s ark and Jonah and the whale, and tried to express spiritual truths through his art. The Jewish Museum in New York created an exhibition in 2004 about Kandinsky and other German expressionists in the Blaue Reiter (Blue Rider) group, focusing on the intellectual dialogue and friendship between Kandinsky and composer Arnold Schoenberg, and charting the parallel (and related) movements toward abstraction in art and atonality in music in the early twentieth century. The Jewish Museum also exhibited the work of Robert Motherwell in a 2010 show called “Modern Art, Sacred Space.” Motherwell designed synagogue murals, tapestries and stained-glass windows, for which he immersed himself in Jewish iconography.

[Mousterpiece](#), which has received several starred reviews, was named to Kirkus’s best books list 2013 and “Best of 2012” by the International Reading Association Children’s Literature and Reading. Zalben has developed projects to tie into the concepts of [Mousterpiece](#) for classrooms and home—“where all studios begin.” They are available on her Web site, [www.janebreskinzalben.com](http://www.janebreskinzalben.com). Her series about a Jewish bear named Beni, Beni’s Family Treasury for the Jewish Holidays (Henry Holt/Macmillan) will be back in print this spring, 25 years after the publication of the first title. She is a three-time recipient of the Sydney Taylor Honor Book Award from the Association of Jewish Libraries.



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