

by Marcia G. Yerman

INNOVATOR, ACTIVIST, HEALER: THE ART OF FRIEDL DICKER-BRANDEIS

The Jewish Museum in New York City hosted an extensive exhibition celebrating the life and work of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis from September 2004 through January 2005. It was titled: *Innovator, Activist, Healer: The Art of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis*.

I went to see the exhibit with my ten year old son and my father, two generations separated by over seventy years. My Father lived through and served in World War II. My son's universe has been shaped by the events of 9/11. They each experienced what they saw differently, and within the context of their respective frames of reference. I was eager to learn about a woman who was independent, dynamic, and creative. Friedl Dicker-Brandeis was totally engaged in the world at a time when people were swept up in the events of history, over which they ultimately had no control. I found the exhibit tremendously moving. I went back for a second time, alone, to contemplate Friedl Dicker-Brandeis's life with the intention of writing this column. The example of how she chose to meet the various challenges she faced offers much of enduring value.



Lady in a Car, 1940, Pastel on Paper, Collection of The Jewish Museum in Prague

Friedl Dicker-Brandeis was born in Vienna in 1898. Her Mother died before her fourth birthday. In 1915, she began her formal art training. One of her influences was Johannes Itten, a Swiss painter who believed that "art served global harmony." Itten was affiliated with the Bauhaus, the school of design located in Weimar, Germany. In 1919, Dicker-Brandeis went to study at the Bauhaus, and remained there for a period of four years. She was influenced by their concepts of applying the visual arts to improving the conditions of the world. She synthesized these ideas into a point of view that would evidence itself throughout her career, as she sought to integrate functionality with artistic vision.

In 1923, Dicker-Brandeis founded the Workshop of Visual Arts, a design studio. Her collaborator was Franz Singer, with whom she had a romantic relationship. Although Singer was married and had a child, their shared beliefs continued to keep them connected. They produced costume and stage designs for Berthold Viertel's theatre company, and received commissions for textiles, graphics, and bookbinding. With the intent of making art an integral part of daily living, they conceived jewelry, games, and toys. The workshop was committed to not differentiating between fine art and crafts, the latter which was often relegated to the secondary status of "women's work." In 1926, the couple established the architectural firm Atelier Singer-Dicker. Their designs were both functional and original, and they were recognized at the 1929 *Exhibition of Viennese Designers*.



Bouquet of Flowers and Key, 1944,
Watercolor on Paper Collection of Simon Wiesenthal Center

They set up workshops to teach unemployed young people to build furniture and household items, in an effort to focus on the devastating issues of housing shortages and unemployment. They garnered a reputation for their socially conscious sensibility, and in 1930 received a commission from the Montessori school in Vienna. During this period, Friedl also began to teach kindergarten. Simultaneously, her projects were lucrative, and she was able to sustain herself financially.

Friedl responded to the growth of the Fascist movement by joining the Communist Party. She designed posters using photo-collage, in an innovative style that was a precursor to what the eye is accustomed to today. In one piece, she juxtaposed Hitler near a crying infant with the text, *"This is how it looks my child, the world that you were born into. If you do not like this world, then you will have to change it."* In 1933, when Hitler came to power, the Bauhaus were closed and the Communist party went underground. Friedl continued to play a pro-active role by forging and hiding documents for friends on the premises of her Atelier. When illegal passports were found by the authorities, Friedl was arrested. Upon her release from jail, she went to Prague – which was considered safer.

It was in Prague, in 1936, that she met and married her second cousin, Pavel Brandeis. Friedl continued in her efforts to impact a world out of control by teaching art to traumatized refugee children. She set a conceptual precedent by organizing an exhibition of her student's work, not standard fare for 1937.

The following year, with Nazism and anti-Semitism escalating, con-

cerned friends and colleagues pressed her to escape Europe. She was able to acquire a certificate of immigration to Palestine, but Pavel was not. Unwilling to abandon her husband, the couple stayed in Prague until the summer of 1938, when they went into hiding in Hronov, a small village in the Czech countryside. Despite living in small quarters and being isolated from the life she had known, Friedl continued to paint. One of her most emblematic works of this period was *Lady In a Car* (1940). Symbolic, psychological, and internal, this pastel on paper was one of her last self-portraits created in freedom.

In December of 1942, Friedl and Pavel were deported to Terezin concentration camp. The Nazis sent numerous artists, writers, musicians, and intellectuals to this site outside of Prague. The goal was to create a "town" that was promoted, in a classic disinformation propaganda campaign, as the *"Führer's Gift to the Jews."* In reality, it was not the ideal city of the Jews, but a converted military garrison. Previously built to house 8,000 people, the space contained 60,000 Jews. Friedl became part of the cultural atmosphere that included art exhibitions, symphony concerts, and theater production. With the limited art materials that she could obtain, she chose to reaffirm her optimism by painting landscapes, still lifes, and people. She had stated four years earlier, *"My life in art has redeemed me from a thousand deaths."*

Through her specific actions, Friedl's choices would resonate by impacting others. At Terezin, she dissented when she was assigned to work in the technical drawing department making illustrations to be used to promote the goals of the Nazis. She was reassigned to live in the children's home for girls, and to teach art classes to the children of the camp. She encouraged her students to make art that gave expression to their innermost feelings. Secretly, she worked with those who were psychologically overwhelmed by the traumatic conditions of Terezin, using techniques that were precursors to modern art therapy.

In July of 1943, Friedl arranged a clandestine exhibition of the children's drawings. Before her final deportation to Auschwitz-Birkenau in October 1944, she packed two suitcases storing almost 5,000 drawings created by the children of Terezin.

In 1945, after the war, the hidden suitcases were brought from Terezin to the Jewish community in Prague. In 1964, they were compiled into a book, along with the poetry of Terezin's captive children, called *I Never Saw Another Butterfly*. The majority of those children did not survive.

When Pavel received his notice in September of 1944 to be transported to Auschwitz, Friedl refused to stay behind in Terezin. She was sent to Auschwitz on October 6th, and died in the gas chambers three days later. Pavel survived and lived until 1971.

One of the last paintings in the exhibit is *Bouquet of Flowers with Key* from 1944. The wall text reads:

"Bouquet of Flowers with Key, one of the last paintings that Dicker-Brandeis created, depicts a key and the flowers that were a present for her forty-sixth birthday from her students. The key was to her room and was an important symbol for her that stood for her independence and her privacy. The bright sea of radiant flowers are a celebration of life and a vision of hope."