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Local artist makes Jewish arts and crafts her life's work

By ELAINE MARKOWITZ
Jewish Press

Susan Lebo of Palm Harbor said she spends most of her free time with a sewing needle in hand.

"I'm always creating something," she said, adding that keeping arthritic fingers in motion has health benefits as well.

The end product might be a beaded scene on canvas, a shadow-box, a colorful quilt, a pillowcase in needlepoint, a knitted yarmulke, an embroidered challah or matzah cover or lots of pot holders.

Her art is all consuming, she said, but the common thread is her Jewish heritage in which she expresses pride. Jewish themes and symbols appear in all the work, including blue and white Chanukah ties dotted with little dreidels which she gives as gifts to adult and child alike.

"Judaism is very, very important to me," she said. "I never thought of doing any other kind of art."

Lebo can't say exactly how many pieces she has made since she and her husband, Neil, retired, leaving Milwaukee and settling in Palm Harbor in 1994, but her work, along with items collected over years of travel, fills every nook and cranny of the couple's Palm Harbor townhouse.

In addition to the original pieces, which Lebo guesses to number somewhere between 50 and 75, an equal number of collected pieces



Photos by ELAINE MARKOWITZ

Among her collection of Judaica, Lebo used some 60,000 crystal beads to recreate each of these famed Marc Chagall windows. The originals, which depict the Twelve Tribes of Israel, are at Hadassah Medical Center in Jerusalem.

of all sizes sit on shelves, tabletops and floor tiles.

The living room is the main display area and holds her two most time-consuming pieces — 16 by 20-inch framed beaded canvases, each containing some 60,000 crystal seed beads. Each canvas took Lebo about four months to create, working three or more hours a day. She and her husband then stretched the canvases onto frames themselves.

Each scene depicts a tribe of Israel and is patterned after the stained glass windows created by Marc Chagall, the famed 20th century Russian artist noted for his playful scenes of village life in Eastern Europe. Chagall's 12 original windows hang on the walls of the synagogue at Hebrew University's Hadassah Medical Center in Jerusalem.

For her patterns, Lebo often sketches directly from cards or pictures onto canvases and sometimes creates free form designs from what she calls "images I carry in my mind." She said her beaded pictures are the only artwork she does on pre-patterned canvases. The materials needed for each of the Chagall canvases, she said, cost upward of \$400.

In the entrance to the living room stand several other beaded canvases, replicas of another favorite, Israeli artist Yaakov Agam. Agam is noted for abstract, colorful paintings that have a three-dimensional effect.

Not just any beads or canvas will do. She uses only Czechoslovakian glass seed beads, tiny beads in bright or muted colors, which she purchases from local art shops or private dealers.

"There are other types of seed beads," she said, "but the Czechoslovakian ones have a greater variety of color and more luster."

Neil Lebo, who shops with his wife, knows the difficulty in finding the right canvas as well.

"She uses only Penelope canvases," he said, describing a canvas with horizontal and vertical lines that contains small and large spaces and is woven with double threads. The tiny seed beads, he said, require the tiny spaces.

The two canvases, each perched on a decorative easel, may take center stage but don't tell the whole tale of the living room. Tables, shelves and walls all hold the fruit of hours of labor in some form or another.

On glass shelves, or grouped in sections on the floor, are tradi-



A wall hanging that Lebo designed and created in needlepoint, depicts a tree of life with Jewish symbols along the trunk. The wall hanging is in the foyer to the Lebos' home in Palm Harbor.

tional Chanukah menorahs, some collected on the couple's travels, others fashioned by Lebo herself. Her handmade menorahs are done in stone, wood or glass. Collages made of cut up Jewish greeting cards dot walls, as do handmade shadow-boxes encasing rare and antique Jewish trinkets. Those trinkets, said Neil Lebo, were collected on travels or inherited from their families.

Pointing to a shadow-box featuring tiny six-pronged Jewish stars and several seven-branched traditional menorahs, Neil Lebo said, "Some of these things are more than a hundred years old. We got most of them from the Arab market in Jerusalem."

Family shadow-boxes line the hallway walls as well. They display artifacts going back generations, including documents of some family members on both sides lost in the Holocaust.

The back bedroom is a repository for art in the making. The room has been transformed to a workshop holding all the tools of her trade: scissors, knives, swatches of fabric, balls of yarn, vials of colored beads and a sewing machine, among other supplies.

"It's a mess," she said of her workshop, "but I am always at work on something creative."

In the entryway hangs a framed sewn and embroidered rich brown tree with free floating green leaves. The tall trunk of the tree is decorated with Jewish symbols, including a shofar, Star of David, Torah scroll and menorah. Lebo said she designed and created the work from

• ARTIST continued on NEXT PAGE

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