
Will the Real Janet Sobel Please Stand Up?

by Libby Seaberg

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I first heard of the artist Janet Sobel in 1998, thirty years after her death. She was being cited because of her work's connections to her contemporary Jackson Pollock's, and because I had never heard of her before, and she was a woman, I decided I wanted to know more about her and her art.

As a New York–born artist and art historian who had written her master's essay on Marc Chagall's book illustrations under Meyer Schapiro's supervision, I was drawn even more to learning about Janet Sobel's personal history when I learned that, like members of my family, she had emigrated to New York City from Eastern Europe—in fact, from the same region as Chagall—and that in mid-life, with no training, she had become not merely a well-regarded exhibiting artist in the 1940s, but one whose occasional examples of poured and fluid all-over abstraction slightly predated and possibly influenced Pollock's own development.

With these facts to propel me, I undertook what became a fairly lengthy search for reliable information about Janet Sobel, a search that included my study and evaluation of other writings about her and then the investigation of primary sources that could corroborate more accurate information about her life and career. When I went as far as I could in this search, I decided to create this Web site to present my findings.

I would have loved to accompany this site with the authorized reproduction of Sobel's painting *Milky Way*, which is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art and is one of her best-known works, particularly because one of the few monographic articles about Janet Sobel, in the Spring/Summer 2005 issue of the *Woman's Art Journal*, did reproduce this painting but incorrectly identified it as her painting *Music*. Unfortunately, representatives of Sobel's estate would not grant me the necessary permission to reproduce *Milky Way*, *Music*, or, indeed, any of her works here, despite my willingness to pay the considerable costs of doing so. If there are any

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reproductions of Sobel's works accompanying this site, they shown here only as links to their reproduction on other Internet sites, and, of course, they can be removed by and from those other sites at any time.

Despite this obstacle and to help overcome it, I am pleased to make the results of my research into Janet Sobel's biography available here. As you will discover, I have not been able to find all of the documentation I have sought, especially of her early history; I hope that others will be able to build upon what I have found and add correctly to our knowledge of this intriguing artist. I hope, too, that I am not being too naive in wishing that her vivid and intensely felt body of work, which is often not related to Jackson Pollock's, becomes better known by, and not merely marketed to, the generations of viewers who are just hearing her name for the first or second time. Whether Janet Sobel is sold to the art public as an outsider or an insider, I hope that all students of mid-twentieth-century American painting and even those who stand to benefit most from her works' increasing attention and rising prices are pleased that I have given her life and, to a degree, her art, the fuller, more accurate delineations they deserve.

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Pollock's radical new method of pouring, dripping, and spattering paint emerged in 1947, but the poured passages in these three abstract works from 1943 make it clear that he had explored such possibilities years before. Already, in a workshop in 1936, the Mexican painter David Siqueiros had encouraged Pollock to fling, pour, and spatter paint. Pollock could also have been aware of the use of poured or dripped paint in the work of many other artists, from André Masson and Joan Miró through Hans Hofmann and Janet Sobel.

I read the above words on a wall of the Museum of Modern Art's masterful Jackson Pollock retrospective in 1998. Although I had felt that I was relatively well informed about which artists were Pollock's contemporaries, and particularly about the few women artists who were admitted into the pantheon of first-generation abstract expressionism, I had never heard of Janet Sobel. Intrigued by this lacuna in my idea of who made up this remarkable group of New York artists, I set about trying to find out more about her and her notable accomplishment, seemingly carried out under the watchful gaze of what I then saw as an especially clairvoyant group of art historians, who had never before imparted their knowing understanding of this aspect of mid-twentieth-century art to me before.

After consulting William S. Rubin's article discussing, in part, the influence of Janet Sobel's all-over painting style on Jackson Pollock's

development¹ [please click on numerical superscripts to link to their respective endnotes], I solicited additional information about Janet Sobel from Gary Snyder, the art dealer representing Sobel's art estate. Snyder provided me with photocopies of numerous early news clippings and other documents about Janet Sobel; referred me to Ann Eden Gibson's then-recent, groundbreaking book *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*;² and gave me telephone and written access to Sol Sobel, Janet Sobel's last-surviving child and greatest advocate, and to Sol's equally devoted wife, Leah Sobel. Snyder and the Sobels were initially very helpful in providing me with information about Janet Sobel's life and art career. To enlarge my knowledge of some newer critical perspectives on abstract expressionism and the part that Janet Sobel and others played in those perspectives, I also turned to the writings of Jeffrey Wechsler³ and Deborah A. Goldberg,⁴ in addition to the just-mentioned Ann Eden Gibson,⁵ for their information and insights, published in the 1990s.

In his catalog essay, Jeffrey Wechsler wrote that Janet Sobel's "relevant biography is simplicity itself."⁶ Wechsler then quoted William Rubin's 1967 article (cited in my preceding paragraph) to elaborate on his thought:

Born in Russia in 1894, Mrs. Sobel came to America at the age of fourteen, married, had five children, and was a grandmother when she began to paint in 1939.⁷

I have found, however, that Janet Sobel's biography, though short, is anything but simple. Although it is true that she was born in Russia in the last decade of the nineteenth century, that she was married, the mother of five children, a grandmother when she began to paint, probably in 1939, and that she died on November 11, 1968,⁸ very little, particularly about her early life, is definitely known about her. Since her death, much of what has been written about her life has been recounted or corroborated by her son Sol and his wife, Leah. Unfortunately, Sol Sobel, who was eighty years old when I first spoke to him, said that he no longer had his older brother Bernard to provide him with the missing facts about their mother's life that his brother knew and Sol did not remember.

When Sol Sobel became reluctant or unable to continue to answer my questions

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about his mother, I concluded that I had to find reliable primary sources that could clarify the often conflicting details that I had read or been told about Janet Sobel's life. I continued this study steadily until 9/11 temporarily made current events in New York City more urgent to me than those of the New York art world of the 1940s and 1950s, and my research at the heavily guarded New York office of the National Archives became more difficult.

The first document I located and retrieved, from the New York City Department of Records and Information Services in the Municipal Archives, was a copy of Janet and Max Sobel's marriage certificate, which Sol and Leah Sobel told me they did not have.⁹ The certificate showed that Sol's parents, then Jennie Wilson and Max Zebulsky, had married on June 9, 1910, and it provided other bits of personal information about the couple. Then Gail Levin wrote the essay for the 2003 exhibition catalog *Inside Out: Selected Works by Janet Sobel*.¹⁰ Levin followed that essay with her 2005 portrait of Janet Sobel in the *Woman's Art Journal* [WAJ],¹¹ which repeated and enlarged her 2003 catalog essay and attempted to correct some of its errors. When I resumed my study of Janet Sobel's life, I saw that my research led me to factual conclusions often very different from Gail Levin's and occasionally from those of previous writers, and much of this article will discuss the instances in which I think these writers have not reported on Janet Sobel's life and achievement accurately.

Foremost among these instances, because it diminishes our knowledge of Sobel's art even more than of her life, is Gail Levin's mistake in identifying and describing two of Sobel's most significant and exhibited abstract works—the paintings *Music* (1944) and *Milky Way* (1945). *Milky Way*, which is almost twice the size of *Music*, is now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, given to it by Sobel's family in 1968. Unfortunately, the disappearance of these two paintings from public view for so many years made it very difficult to discover Levin's and/or the *Woman's Art Journal's* error, and it was only because I had very recently obtained a reproduction of *Milky Way* from the Museum of Modern Art's rights and reproduction agent, Art Resource, that I was able to realize that

color plate 5 of Levin's article in the *WAJ* was identified as *Music*, but is actually a very bad reproduction of *Milky Way*.

The importance of this misidentification becomes clear in Levin's attempt to map the route by which Jackson Pollock became acquainted with, if not influenced by, Janet Sobel's all-over abstract style, for Levin writes, "We can be sure, too, that Pollock knew Sobel's *Music*, for it appeared as a full-page color reproduction that year [1944] in Sidney Janis's *Abstract & Surrealist Art in America*."¹² Although Pollock knew *Music*, we are not assured that Levin did; *Music*'s caption to plate 5 of her article in the *WAJ* says that the painting's location is unknown and that its photo's source was Janis's *Abstract & Surrealist Art in America*. (A double check of *Abstract & Surrealist Art in America* verifies that it did reproduce *Music*, on page [96], and provided, on the facing page, the reproduction's caption and Sobel's statement correlating the feelings she derived from hearing Shostakovitch's stirring music to those she wanted to instill in her painting *Music*). As indicated above, Sobel's *Milky Way* was painted in 1945 and could not have been reproduced in *Abstract & Surrealist Art in America*, which was published in 1944. Levin also tells us that Pollock saw Sobel's first solo exhibition (1944) at Manhattan's Puma Gallery, on Fifty-Seventh Street, and that *Music* was featured in that exhibition, although the painting was not on the show's checklist.¹³ Levin mentions that a 1944 review in the *Brooklyn Eagle* reported on the exhibition of Sobel's latest painting, *Music*.¹⁴ This review was probably a *Brooklyn Eagle* article dated April 25, 1944, one day after her opening at the Puma Gallery. Clippings of this article, provided me by Gary Snyder, contain a photograph of, its caption says, Sobel explaining her painting *Music* to the Puma Gallery's director, Fernando Puma. However, the *Brooklyn Eagle*, like the *Woman's Art Journal*, identifies another wrong painting—in this case a figural one, crowded with clothed and some unclothed women and men, pressed against each other and against the landscape beside and behind them—as Sobel's *Music*.

Now that we know that Levin has mistaken *Milky Way* for *Music*, we can only be baffled by Levin's sentence in the *WAJ* that reads: "Given the prominent exhibition history documented for Sobel's *Music*, with its dripped enamel paint in

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an all-over pattern, it is not surprising that *Milky Way*, which quite closely resembles *Music*, recommended itself to [William] Rubin for acquisition.”¹⁵ Which of Sobel’s paintings is Levin describing? Although the misnamed color reproduction of *Milky Way* (plate 5 in Levin’s *WAJ* article) looks like Sobel painted the entire work with a glaze of brown gravy, the reproduction of the painting provided by Art Resource shows Sobel’s much more piquant, light-filled approach to surface and form. In Art Resource’s reproduction, barely connected pink, pink gold, whitened blue, and delicate black webs and arabesques enliven the violet, deep red, brown, and varying blue grounds beneath them, and there is a definite sense that the colored forms differ in their depth and distance from one another.

Although both paintings are abstract, the surface of the real *Music* is much more integrated and uniform than is *Milky Way*’s, and it is hard to see a true resemblance between them. *Music*’s patterns of light and dark, represented by color areas similar in shape and size, are distributed almost equally across the entire painting. With the exception of the narrow piece of green ground that indicates a deeper space in its upper left, the painting seems to exist in a single plane, in which weaving, flat strands and delicate clusters of yellow and green light embroider a blackened field.

Turning now to the numerous distortions and errors in previous accounts of Sobel’s life story, we find that in the sentences opening her *WAJ* article, Gail Levin writes, “The feminist movement was already underway, when, in 1968, William Rubin, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) traveled to Plainfield, New Jersey, to meet Janet Sobel (1894-1968),”¹⁶ who “by then was bedridden and near death...”¹⁷ Here Levin insists, “Although [Clement] Greenberg claimed in 1955 that Sobel was still ‘a housewife living in Brooklyn,’ she had long since relocated and her forwarding address might well have been unknown.”¹⁸ In fact, however, Gary Snyder had given me a photocopy of a letter written to Janet Sobel on November 18, 1947, by Mark Rothko (see [Documents page](#)). Rothko was writing to Sobel on Peggy Guggenheim’s behalf, asking Sobel

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to send him biographical information and other relevant material that he would send to Peggy Guggenheim (Guggenheim had already closed her New York gallery, Art of This Century, and moved back to Europe). Rothko's letter was addressed to Sobel's Plainfield, New Jersey, address, which proves that someone in the New York art world or, at least, its Peggy Guggenheim contingent, knew, as far back as 1947, that Sobel was no longer living in Brooklyn.

Levin argues, "Except for Greenberg's brief citation, Janet Sobel was for a time completely forgotten by the New York art world."¹⁹ However, the question then arises, "How did William Rubin know where Janet Sobel lived in New Jersey and what led Rubin to visit her there?" These questions apparently also occurred to Janet Sobel's son Sol, because he seems to have written a note to Clement Greenberg asking him if it was he who had directed William Rubin to his mother just before her death in 1968. In a postcard dated March 16, 1971 [photocopy of this card provided to me by Gary Snyder and reproduced on [Documents page](#)], Greenberg answered Sol Sobel, admitting that he had given "Bill Rubin his lead" to Janet Sobel, and telling Sol that he would welcome a meeting with him; Greenberg also gave Sol Sobel his phone number and home address (one wonders, however, how Sol's note reached Greenberg if Sol did not know Greenberg's address; the fact that Greenberg mailed Sobel a publicly accessible postcard stating his home address and phone number also suggests how much more open the New York art world was thirty-seven years ago than it is today. Presumably, Sol Sobel had written to Greenberg after seeing his mother's work in the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition *Recent Acquisitions: Painting and Sculpture, July 27–September 13, 1970* (extended through October 18, 1970).²⁰

Although Janet Sobel's exhibition history during her lifetime was relatively short and straightforward, Levin confuses it when she writes, as if about two different shows, "Sobel's work had last been shown in 'A Painting Prophecy' at the David Porter Gallery, Washington, D.C. in 1950,"²¹ and, in the same article, Levin writes, "[Peggy] Guggenheim also encouraged Sobel to participate in a show called 'A Painting Prophecy, 1950' being organized by her friend, the artist and

dealer David Porter, at his gallery in Washington, D.C.^{Levin's note 48} Sobel sent *Milky Way* to the exhibition, which took place in early 1945.²² My own search of David Porter's publications turned up the reference listing Porter as the compiler of *Personal Statement, Painting Prophecy, 1950*.²³ Porter tells us that the personal statements in this publication were "written by a group of artists whose paintings had been invited to an exhibition entitled 'A painting prophecy—1950' first shown in February, 1945, at The David Porter Gallery on G Place in Washington, D.C."²⁴ Porter goes on to write that "the purpose of this exhibition is to suggest the existence of an active group of artists in this country who, unconscious of one another's contribution, may be forming a new set of painting ideologies and a new school of art, for which the war has been the catalytic agent. The exhibition also may be considered a prophecy of a widespread understanding of this new kind of painting five years hence."²⁵

Levin also writes, in her *WAJ* article, that several months after Sobel sent *Milky Way* to *A Painting Prophecy—1950*, on February 22, 1945,²⁶ "Porter wrote to Sobel while the show was on to indicate that her work was 'bringing forth some interesting comments,'"²⁷ and "invited her to send work for another exhibition, 'The Women.'"²⁸ Levin states that Porter, in a telephone conversation with her on December 10, 2003, confirmed that the show called *The Women* "actually did take place at his Washington, D.C. gallery in June 1945. Its earlier venues were Western College, Oxford, Ohio (March 1945) and Mary Baldwin College, Staunton, Va. (May 1945)."²⁹ Levin, however, does not tell us whether Porter told her that Sobel's work was shown in his gallery's version of *The Women*.

Siobhán M. Conaty offers a somewhat different view of how *The Women* originated.³⁰ In her catalog essay to the 1997–98 exhibition *Art of This Century: The Women* that she had guest curated, Conaty writes that the 1943 *Exhibition by 31 Women* at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery,³¹ "paved the way for a second show in 1945 simply called 'The Women,' which Peggy Guggenheim organized herself."³² Gail Levin contradicts Conaty's statement that Guggenheim

alone organized *The Women*, writing, “When Guggenheim’s gallery presented the 1945 show, ‘The Women,’ in which Janet Sobel’s work appeared, the jury included, besides Ernst and Guggenheim, Marcel Duchamp, André Breton, James Johnson Sweeney, James Thrall Soby, and Howard Putzel.”³³ Levin contends that this information about a jury came directly from Peggy Guggenheim’s memoir;³⁴ however, Guggenheim wrote in her memoir that this jury selected the earlier, 1943, show *Exhibition by 31 Women*;³⁵ she barely mentions the 1945 show in her memoir, saying simply that her gallery “also held several spring salons, gave another woman’s show, two *collage* shows,…”³⁶ Moreover, Levin’s note 43 incorrectly says that Guggenheim’s memoir *Out of This Century: Confessions of an Art Addict*, was first published in 1946 and reprinted in 1979.³⁷ Actually, Guggenheim’s 1946 memoir was called *Out of This Century: The Informal Memoirs of Peggy Guggenheim*,³⁸ and it was combined with Guggenheim’s 1960 *Confessions of an Art Addict* to be published, generally with real names rather than with its earlier pseudonyms, in 1979 as *Out of This Century: Confessions of an Art Addict*.³⁹ Conaty, however, writes that Peggy Guggenheim “had been in correspondence with David Porter, a friend and fellow gallery owner in Washington DC, about the development of another all-female show. David Porter was working on a similar project for his gallery and the two shared ideas about the artists chosen for their shows. In fact, many of the same artists exhibited in both shows, and Porter recalled Guggenheim’s telling him, ‘your show is mostly my show, I should get credit for it.’ Conaty’s note 22”⁴⁰ Conaty’s catalog confirms that Janet Sobel’s work was exhibited in *The Women* at Art of This Century in 1945, but not in Conaty’s re-creation of the exhibition in 1997–98.⁴¹

In another reference to Sobel’s work *Milky Way*, Levin fails to clarify Sobel’s exhibition chronology when she writes, “Until *Milky Way* was acquired by Rubin in 1968 and shown among the recent acquisitions at the Museum of Modern Art in 1970, two decades had elapsed since Sobel’s work had been exhibited in New York City.”⁴² Instead of citing here Sobel’s one-person show at Art of This Century in 1946, her most recent exhibition in New York City, Levin writes that “Sobel’s work had last been shown in ‘A Painting Prophecy’ at the David Porter Gallery, Washington, D.C. in

1950,”⁴³ giving the exhibition’s wrong date, and in Sobel’s solo show “at Swain’s Art Store near her home in Plainfield, N.J.” in March 1962.⁴⁴

Levin believes that it was Sobel’s “isolation in New Jersey, her gender, and her allergies to paint [that] all contributed to her subsequent obscurity.”⁴⁵ As Levin sees it, the Sobels’ move to New Jersey in 1947 (which Levin mistakenly says took place in 1946)⁴⁶ allowed the Sobel men to be closer to their factory in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, “but Janet Sobel, who, like many women of her generation, had not learned to drive, was now farther from New York and the art world.”⁴⁷ Given the facts that Sobel’s second solo exhibition in New York City, at Peggy Guggenheim’s famed gallery, Art of This Century, took place early in 1946 and that Sobel’s radio interview by Bill Leonard on CBS occurred in December 1946, it appears odd that Levin would contend that Sobel moved to New Jersey in 1946, a year in which she was noticeably not isolated from the New York art world. When Levin argues that Sobel’s gender was one of the three main causes of her later obscurity, Levin does not really explain why Janet Sobel’s being a woman ended her art world recognition except that it meant she could not drive. However, when Janet began to work at the Sobel Brothers factory in Perth Amboy right after her husband’s death in 1953, one must assume that she was able to travel regularly, back and forth, between Plainfield and Perth Amboy despite her inability to drive.

What seems to me even more important for understanding Janet Sobel’s motives for making art and possibly for explaining, in part, why the New York art world abruptly forgot her work is contained in her statement that she sent to Porter for the catalog of *A Painting Prophecy, 1950*: “I am interested in people and everything that pertains to them.”⁴⁸ Her statement is short, succinct, and humanistic, but in it, Sobel unfortunately, does not identify herself as a visual artist, and so the statement differentiates her profoundly from the artistic and intellectual ambitions expressed in the statements of the exhibition’s twenty-one other artists, who included Robert Motherwell, Stuart Davis, William Baziotos, Adolph Gottlieb, Jackson Pollack [sic], Louise Bourgeois, I. Rice Pereira, Jimmy Ernst, and Mark Rothko.⁴⁹ Sobel’s statement, however, shows a remarkable congruance with the humanistic title of a book that first appeared in 1952, *Life Is*

with People: The Culture of the Shtetl, which Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, a New York University professor, writes “was the first major anthropological study of East European Jewish culture in the English language.”⁵⁰ In contrast to others, I would even argue that Janet Sobel’s fame in the early and mid- 1940s came about because she was a woman, especially one whose very homey domesticity was so different from the public’s ideas of what the typical avant-garde artists then coming to prominence—like Jackson Pollock—were like.⁵¹ It may also be true that during World War II, when American men were more likely to be serving in the armed forces and overseas, it was easier for a woman to receive recognition for working in a factory or as an artist and doing a “man’s job.” Beyond her work’s artistic qualities, the press was intrigued that so conventional a woman—a matronly, plump, unpretentious, middle-aged, middle-class Jewish Brooklyn mother of five, a grandmother, a housewife, who had no art training and who had begun to make art only in the past five or six years—was so gifted and original an artist. However, Sobel never had to seek out the interest and support of members of the New York art world and cultural hierarchy on her own; she was very fortunate that her son Sol so energetically showed his mother’s artworks to his own art teachers and to prominent individuals like Sidney Janis, who at the time was known as a collector and art writer and had not yet opened his gallery; and to the philosopher and educator John Dewey.

Sol also introduced his mother to her fellow Ukrainian émigré, the famed artist Marc Chagall. In her 2005 article, Levin writes that Janet Sobel met Chagall in his studio after Chagall had escaped from Europe to New York in 1941. Levin notes, as did Sol Sobel, who told Levin of this meeting, that his mother and Chagall “spoke Russian together,” not their other shared language, Yiddish, and the two emigrant artists also shared “Russian culture ... and a love of music.”⁵² In Franz Meyer’s massive monograph on Chagall—Meyer’s father-in-law—Meyer explains why Chagall chose to speak in Russian rather than in Yiddish: “Although Chagall and his brothers and sisters still spoke Yiddish with their parents, among themselves and in the street they spoke Russian,” and “the family had given up the use of their Jewish names.”⁵³ Moreover, after leaving his Jewish elementary

school, Chagall was able to attend “the public school, where lessons were taught in Russian.”⁵⁴ Less charitably, Levin quotes a Chagall biographer who mocked Chagall for not learning any English during his stay in America and for becoming even more Russian the longer he stayed in the United States.⁵⁵ In his own defense, Chagall countered such criticism with, “It took me thirty years to learn bad French. I still have time for English.”⁵⁶

Janet Sobel’s indefatigable champion, her son Sol, also introduced his mother’s work to Max Ernst, who, in turn, showed Janet Sobel’s work to Peggy Guggenheim, to whom Ernst was married from 1942 to 1946.⁵⁷ Perhaps Janet Sobel’s art career thrived only through the mid-1940s because she was so dependent on her son’s efforts and the efforts of these prominent and influential individuals to foster her career that she never had to fight on her own behalf. By the time that the sculptor and writer Waylande Gregory interviewed Janet Sobel in her Plainfield home for their town’s local New Jersey newspaper in 1962,⁵⁸ two months before her last exhibition during her lifetime, he reported that she lived in “a great-pillared, Georgian Colonial mansion...among classic cornices, Hellenic porticos, a great winding staircase and many tropical and exotic plants. She is 69 and here in this huge house of 23 rooms surrounded by an avalanche of her own paintings, she lives, attended by two maid companions.”⁵⁹ In that same newspaper’s obituary nine years earlier of Sobel’s husband, Max,⁶⁰ we are told that Max was survived by his wife, Janet Wilson Sobel; their four sons, all living at four addresses of this huge house; and their daughter, Mrs. Robert Boss, of South Orange.⁶¹ Although the Sobels moved from Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, to the isolated suburban quiet of a Plainfield, New Jersey estate, they seemed to need to impose their notion of a crowded, almost shtetl-like settlement onto their new home. Last year, after reading Waylande Gregory’s intriguing description of the Sobels’ luxurious Woodland Avenue home in Plainfield, I tried to view this home more than thirty-five years after Gregory had written about it. However, I discovered that the house, at the top of a steep hill, no longer exists; the property is now the site of a development of fairly large single-family tract homes. It would therefore be hard to imagine Janet Sobel receiving the same level of human-interest media attention in 1962, as the widow of the wealthy president of a

family-owned costume jewelry–manufacturing company employing more than two hundred women as producers, stringers and attachers of artificial pearls,⁶² as she had as a short, plump Brooklyn grandmother and housewife celebrated as an original, yet completely untrained Surrealist and primitive painter in the mid-1940s. For example, the *Brooklyn Eagle* headlined its 1944 article about Sobel’s “first one-woman show,” at the Puma Gallery, as “Palette Packin’ Grandma to Open One-Man Art Show.”⁶³ Obviously the Eagle’s headline writer, using the typical 1940s (and, sadly, even much later—see William Rubin in 1967)⁶⁴ phrase for identifying all solo exhibitions as masculine, was not the same person as the article’s better-informed author.

Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith tell us in their Pulitzer Prize–winning yet controversial biography of Jackson Pollock that when she heard that Pollock was being credited as the inventor of an all-over abstract “drip” painting style, years after her solo show at Art of This Century, Janet Sobel called Sidney Janis to complain that she and not Pollock should have been credited as the founder of the style.⁶⁵ However, Sobel does not seem to have announced her painting discovery or defended her creative achievement publicly in any other way.

Her over-protected, almost passive, and dependent behavior went beyond her fighting for a publicly recognized artistic achievement. For example, her husband, Max, was granted United States citizenship in 1922, the first year that a male immigrant’s being awarded U.S. citizenship did not automatically confer U.S. citizenship on his immigrant wife. Yet it appears that Janet Sobel never applied for American citizenship in her own right, a fact that her son Sol, in his telephone conversation with me, was not aware of, nor was he aware or able to admit that his mother had never voted. My search of the relevant “List of Registered Voters for the Year 1941” for the Borough of Brooklyn revealed that Sol Sobel and Max Sobel were the only residents of their building who were registered to vote in the year that Janet Sobel was probably forty-seven or forty-eight years old.⁶⁶

Another aspect of Janet Sobel’s story is also enlightening. When her husband died in 1953, Janet immediately began to work at Sobel Brothers, Inc., her husband’s

company.⁶⁷ With no evidence to confirm or negate the following hypotheses, I would suggest that she felt it more important to help her late husband's business continue its postwar success bringing financial rewards and security to her family, their children, herself, and the business's many employees than to devote herself to the making and selling of her artworks. Her son Sol was also hard at work in the family business, which to him, too, was obviously a far greater and more dependable source of income than his mother's art career had proven to be. Perhaps Janet Sobel also believed that working at Sobel Brothers enabled her to remain closer to her late husband and to preserve his memory and, at the same time, as she had written eight years earlier, to be "more interested in people and everything that pertained to them" than her full-time painting and drawing alone in her mansion would allow her to be.

More than one reporter has written that Janet Sobel had long suffered from a severe allergy to some ingredient in the paint she used, which Gail Levin plausibly considers was one of the three reasons for Sobel's plunge into obscurity as an artist. We see that this allergy was mentioned in the 1946 *Brooklyn Eagle* article titled "Critics Acclaim Boro Grandmother As Top Flight Surrealist Painter."⁶⁸ Sixteen years later, Waylande Gregory, in his article of January 6, 1962, says that Sobel had to stop painting because of her allergy to the oil pigments in her paint, and Gregory suggested to Sobel's son Bernard that he provide his mother with casein tempera paints, which rarely caused an allergic reaction.⁶⁹ Here we see another instance of someone treating Sobel like either a child or a mentally incompetent or an invalid, advising her son, not Sobel herself, to get the art materials she should use. Levin writes that Janet's son Sol told her that his mother got her enamel paint and some of her other art supplies from the family's jewelry and artificial pearl business.⁷⁰ One can only wonder whether Janet's allergy may have been caused or worsened by her closeness to the contents of the more than two thousand containers of acids, paint thinners, and solvents that were later found and removed from Sobel Brothers' inactive production facility in Perth Amboy. This factory was named a Superfund emergency site, requiring a cleanup at the cost of \$610,000 between October 30, 1990, and December 27, 1991.⁷¹

When Waylande Gregory interviewed Janet Sobel, he disclosed an important fact in his resulting article: that Janet and her family had immigrated to America and New York City before Max and his family had.⁷² My research of U.S. immigration records revealed that Max Sobel (identified there as Mendel Cibulsky) and his father, Chaim Cibulsky, arrived in New York City on the SS *Campania* on July 14, 1906. Sol Sobel told me that his mother had probably arrived in this country in 1908, because that is the year that the Museum of Modern Art acquisition records—created when William Rubin put Sobel’s work into MoMA’s permanent collection—had said that she had arrived here. Sol did not seem to see how citing MoMA’s acquisition records as the source of his mother’s date of arrival here was clearly an instance of putting the cart before the horse and just as illogical. A possible source for claiming that Janet Sobel came to America in 1908 may have been a statement in the brochure of Janet’s first solo exhibition, in 1944, at the Puma Gallery. Levin accepts 1908 without question as the year of Sobel’s arrival in America, yet there are also good reasons for believing that Janet had arrived earlier, in 1905 or 1906. One reason was the just-mentioned interview of Janet Sobel by Waylande Gregory in which she apparently told him that she and her family had come to America before her future husband’s family had.⁷³ Another reason was the 1910 U.S. census report, whose data were collected on April 16, 1910, just before Max and Jennie’s marriage two months later, on June 9, 1910. The census had reported that both Max H. Zebulsky and Jennie Wilson were boarders living in the Gottsdanker family’s apartment at 130 Second Street in Manhattan, and the two boarders had told the census enumerator that they both had come to the United States in 1906.⁷⁴ On Max Zebulsky and Jennie Wilson’s marriage certificate, in contrast to the census, the bride’s address is given as 182 Second Street and the groom’s address is given as 1567 Lexigton [sic] Avenue. The census report does not mention Janet’s mother and two brothers.

Max’s May 19, 1922, Petition for Naturalization says that his wife, Jennie, was born on June 15, 1891, presumably to maintain the possible fiction that she was two years younger than Max, who here says he was born on December 25, 1889. Levin incorrectly states that Janet was born in a village near Ekaterinoslav

in the Ukraine, instead of saying, as does Deborah A. Goldberg and others,⁷⁵ that both Janet and Max came from Ekaterinoslav (in his immigration papers, Max said that he was born in “Kieff, Russia,” and that his last foreign residence was “Ekaterinoslaff, Russia”) described as a village [more accurately, a town or even a city] near [actually about 240 miles from] Kiev, the largest city in the Ukraine; this custom of an immigrant saying that he came, not from an unfamiliar village, but from a place near a big city would be the equivalent of an American from Syracuse, New York, telling a foreign immigration official that he was born near New York City.

My discovery of Max Sobel’s immigration records was a successful part of my otherwise largely useless and very long search of United States immigration records to try to document Janet and her family’s immigration history. I had found it relatively easy to find her husband, Max’s, immigration records, possibly because he applied for and was awarded United States citizenship. Although Gail Levin reports that he was born Michael Zibulsky,⁷⁶ I found that his “List or Manifest of Alien Passengers for the U.S. Immigration Officer at Port of Arrival” for the trip of the *SS Campania* from Liverpool arriving at Ellis Island, New York City, on July 14, 1906, refers to him not as Michael but as *Mendel* Cibulsky or Cebulsky [official copying of the manifest’s handwriting is unclear].⁷⁷ Waylande Gregory’s article on Janet Sobel also refers to Max as Michael, writing, “Janet fell in love at the tender age of 5 with little Michael Sobel in a village outside Kiev, Russia.”⁷⁸ Since Janet and her mother probably never applied for citizenship and I have not found a reference to Janet’s brothers’ names, I have not been able to locate any reference to their transatlantic journey or to their ship’s listing of them. Furthermore, basing her biographical sketch on information she acquired in her interview with Sol and Leah Sobel that took place in Miller Place, New York, on April 30, 1995 (which I suspect was Ann Eden Gibson’s town of residence while she was on the faculty of the State University of New York at Stony Brook), Professor Gibson wrongly claims that Janet Sobel’s birth name was Jennie Llyzhowosky, which changed to “Janet Wilson after she went through Ellis Island.”⁷⁹ With no corroborating evidence, however, Gail Levin contends that Gibson wrote that “Llyzhowosky” was Janet Sobel’s birth name because “Llyzhowosky” is the Ukrainian spelling of Janet’s original family name.⁸⁰ Sol Sobel,

TEXT PAGE 16

probably Professor Gibson's name source, also told me that a name sounding like Llyzhowosky was his mother's birth surname.

Sol Sobel said that his mother and her family got the name Wilson from the name of the ship, by which I assume he meant the ship on which she and her family sailed to the United States. However, there was no ship by the name of Wilson at the time of her immigration, although there were the ships of the Wilson Line of British passenger ships. There was also a ship called the *Kaiser Franz Josef I* (maiden voyage in 1912) that in 1919 was renamed the *Presidente Wilson*, and starting in 1922, there was another ship called the *President Wilson* (originally called the *Empire State*, built in 1921, and renamed the *President Wilson* the following year).⁸¹ Woodrow Wilson was president of the United States from 1913 to 1921,⁸² at least five years after Jennie Wilson and her family had passed through Ellis Island, and it was unlikely that the ship's owner would have named his ship after the president of Princeton University.⁸³ It is also clear that Jennie's first name did not become Janet when she arrived at Ellis Island. Her marriage certificate shows that her name was still signed Jennie Wilson on June 9, 1910, and Max Sobel's naturalization petition, dated May 19, 1922, says his wife's name was still Jennie, as does the 1930 United States Federal Census Population Schedule. The first public instance that I could find of Jennie Sobel's using the name Janet is the Brooklyn Museum's Artist Index, which records that Janet Sobel, living at 3260 Coney Island Avenue, exhibited her work in four annual exhibitions—the twenty-seventh in 1943, the twenty-eighth in 1944, the twenty-ninth in 1945, and the thirtieth in 1946—of the Brooklyn Society of Artists at the Brooklyn Museum.

In a 1946 newspaper clipping headlined "Critics Acclaim Boro Grandmother as Top Flight Surrealist Painter," its unidentified author writes that "Mrs. Sobel, up to six years ago, was just a borough housewife, busy with an invalid mother and a big family, four sons and a daughter."⁸⁴ The reporter then misinforms us, saying that Mrs. Sobel "came to Brooklyn 40 years ago, at the age of 12. Mrs. Sobel, who now has five grandchildren, makes no secret of her age, tells it casually—but doesn't look within a good many years of the actual figure."⁸⁵

Perhaps Mrs. Sobel told her age *too* casually (although, two years earlier, in her column “Only Human” in the *Daily Mirror*, Emily Cheney got it right when she wrote that “Janet Sobel has lived in Brooklyn 20 odd years”)⁸⁶ or now was not very interested in conveying exact facts, or the reporter misunderstood what Mrs. Sobel had said. However, records do not seem to exist that make it possible to determine where in New York Janet Sobel lived when she arrived in the United States, and we are not sure that she arrived in the United States when she was twelve. If she was twelve, then she probably immigrated in late 1905 or in 1906, not in 1908. By 1910, however, she was living in Manhattan and lived there still on January 26, 1916, according to her husband’s Declaration of Intention to become a citizen of the United States. By the time Max had filed his naturalization petition on May 19, 1922, he; his wife, Jennie; and their four oldest children were living in Brooklyn (in fact, the three oldest children, including a son Isidor, who, I discovered, was later named Stanley, were all born in Manhattan); the fourth child, Solomon, already mentioned here as Sol, was born in Brooklyn on April 24, 1920, which suggests that the Sobels had moved to Brooklyn before Sol’s birth.

When I first secured Janet and Max Sobel’s marriage certificate, I was led by it to assume that Janet’s father was at her wedding, since on it her father’s name is given as Bernard Wilson, and we have been told that Janet and her family were given the surname Wilson when they arrived at Ellis Island.⁸⁷ It was not until I later spoke to Leah and Sol Sobel on the telephone and Leah told me that Janet’s father had been killed in Russia, probably in an anti-Jewish pogrom, that I learned that Janet, her mother, and Janet’s two unnamed brothers had come to America alone, after Janet’s father’s death. Despite the Sobels’ near reticence in discussing Janet’s father’s death with me, Gail Levin seems eager to portray Janet Sobel as a victim of great trauma. Levin writes that Sobel’s “work hints at psychic disturbance: her adolescence was interrupted twice, first by the violent death of her father and again by her family’s narrow escape to the U.S.”⁸⁸ Leah Sobel had not expressed great certainty in telling me that Janet’s father

had been killed in a pogrom in Russia, nor did she say that Janet spoke to Sol and her of Janet's father's death, or that Janet and her mother and brothers made a narrow escape from Europe to America, although the Sobels may have suggested to Levin that Janet had experienced these trauma. Janet apparently did tell them that because she and her family did not speak a word of English when they arrived at Ellis Island, their difficult-to-pronounce last name was changed to the Anglophilic surname "Wilson." Janet's mother was known by their new name for the rest of her life, and even beyond, for "Fannie Wilson" is the name on Janet's mother's tombstone in the Sobel family plot in the Beth Israel Cemetery in Woodbridge, New Jersey, where Janet; Janet's husband, Max; Janet and Max's youngest son, Herbert; and Herbert's wife, Rose, are also buried.⁸⁹

Levin, unfortunately, refers even more incorrectly to the subject of Janet's birth name and its change to Wilson.⁹⁰ Pointing to information she claims to have "found" in Janet and Max Sobel's marriage certificate (of which I was the source), Levin writes that Janet Sobel's "marriage certificate, however, lists her as 'Jennie Wilson,' and her mother-in-law as 'Ida Lechovsky.' Her son Sol recalls hearing that the immigration service at Ellis Island assigned his mother's family the name 'Wilson.' But if it was Lechovsky, it is possible that Janet's father was related to her husband's family, as cousins often married in shtetl life."⁹¹ In addition to not providing any evidence for her assertion that shtetl cousins often married each other, Levin fails even more to prove her contention that Janet's father and mother-in-law may have been related because if Levin had read the Sobels' marriage certificate carefully, she would have seen that Janet's mother-in-law's name was recorded there as "Aide Leshinsky"—not Ida Lechovsky (see Documents page). Although Janet Sobel's first name was ambiguously handwritten as "Jannie" or "Jonnie" on the face of the certificate, the bride had clearly signed her first name as "Jennie" on the signature portion of the certificate. Evidently, Levin based her assumption that "Lechovsky" was Janet's family name (and her father's surname) on a section in Deborah A. Goldberg's article on Janet Sobel, in which Goldberg had written that Janet "was born Jennie Lechovsky in Ekaterinoslav, a village outside of Kiev, Ukraine, the daughter of Bernard Lechovsky and Fanny Kahn."⁹²

Goldberg was just a little off the mark in stating that Janet's family name was

Lechovsky. I can say that because, on the advice of the very helpful and well-informed librarians, including Jane Thoner and Jessica Myers, at the Plainfield [New Jersey] Public Library, I applied for and obtained a copy of Janet Sobel's application for a Social Security account number (see [Documents page](#)). Sobel had filed her application on December 7, 1953, approximately two weeks after Max, her husband, had died at the age of sixty-three, on November 24, 1953.⁹³ However, Levin mistakenly writes that Max Sobel died in 1956, not in 1953, and incorrectly claims that Janet only went to work at Sobel Brothers, Inc., in 1956, after Max's death.⁹⁴

From her entries on her Social Security application, I finally learned that Janet Sobel had stated that her birth name was Jennie Olechovsky, that her father's full name was Baruch Olechovsky, that her mother's full name before marriage was Fannie Kinchuk or Kimchuk [Janet's handwriting was slightly unclear], and that Janet's birth date was May 31, 1893. Leah and Sol Sobel wrote to me that May 30, 1893, *not* 1894, was Janet's birth date, because 1893 had been written in Janet's family Bible. Moreover, "May 30, 1893" was inscribed as her birth date on Janet's tombstone in Beth Israel Cemetery in Woodbridge, and her obituary, in New Jersey's *Courier-News*, says that she was seventy-five years old at her death.⁹⁵ In addition, Waylande Gregory also wrote in his interview of her in January 1962 that Janet Sobel was then sixty-nine years old, information that would support the conclusion that Janet Sobel was born in 1893.⁹⁶ Despite these pieces of evidence, Gail Levin and Gary Snyder have not revised their texts saying that Janet Sobel was born in 1894.

In her Social Security application, Sobel also wrote that her employer was Sobel Brothers, Inc., at 400 Barclay Street in Perth Amboy, New Jersey (at the time of his death, her husband, Max, was president of the company). Janet Sobel's obituary described her position further, stating that at her death Mrs. Sobel "was vice president and a director of Sobel Brothers, Inc.,

costume jewelers of Perth Amboy.”⁹⁷ Deborah A. Goldberg further elaborated on Janet Sobel’s contribution to her family’s business, saying that Mrs. Sobel helped “to coordinate the design and color of new lines of jewelry.”⁹⁸

Although the discovery of Janet Sobel’s Social Security application and other public documents have added useful details to her history, I believe that until someone can unearth her immigration records, it will probably be almost impossible to give a more reliable account of her early life. In spite of her work’s slippage from most of the art world’s collective memory after the mid-1940s, Sobel’s art is deservedly now receiving new critical attention that, hopefully, will not dissipate as quickly as it did in the past. It would be a pity if her artistic achievements and vital life story were now undermined by her implausibly being declared the victim of gender bias or by a too-vigorous sales campaign and its fragile scholarly underpinnings.

While putting this essay on-line without the benefit of adequate reproductions of Janet Sobel’s art was not how I had intended to publish it, I concluded that only by making my research available here without further delay could I effectively challenge the too-quickly-assumed veracity of those who have been authorized to speak for her and, in doing so, I would help to illuminate who Janet Sobel truly was.

To reach Documents page, please click [here](#).

To reach first Notes page, please click [here](#).

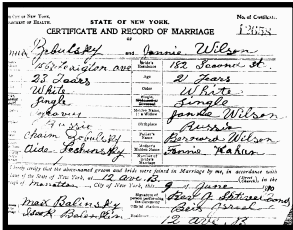
To reach another page, please click “[Contents page](#)” below at left.

Will the Real Janet Sobel Please Stand Up?

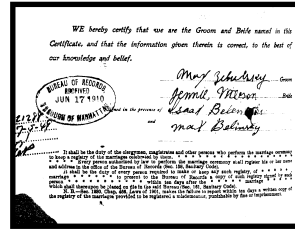
DOCUMENTS

Janet Sobel's Personal Records

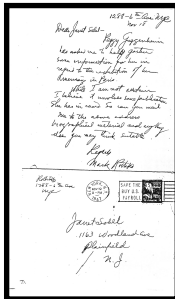
Although I am unable to reproduce any of Janet Sobel's artworks on this site except as links to her works on other sites, I am able to reproduce here four of the public documents cited in my text as evidence of some of my conclusions about the artist's life. Please click **on each of the images below to enlarge each of them.**



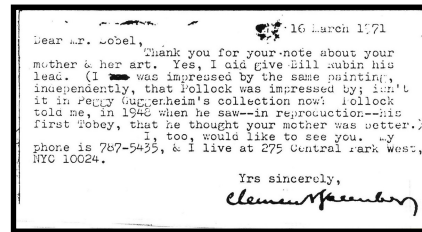
Jennie Wilson and Max Zebulsky's Marriage Certificate (front)



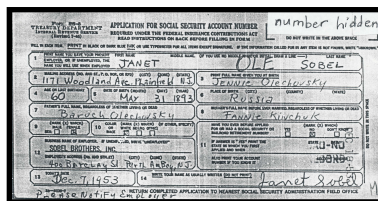
Jennie Wilson and Max Zebulsky's Marriage Certificate (back)



Mark Rothko's letter to Janet Sobel



Clement Greenberg's postcard to Sol Sobel



Janet Sobel's Social Security Application

Will the Real Janet Sobel Please Stand Up?

Marriage Certificate

Click on either image to return to previous Documents page.

THE CITY OF NEW YORK. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH. STATE OF NEW YORK. No. of Certificate. 12533

CERTIFICATE AND RECORD OF MARRIAGE

of

Max Zebulsky and Jennie Wilson

Name of Groom	Max Zebulsky	Bride's Residence	182 Second St.
Address of Groom	156 Lexington Ave	Age	21 Years
Age of Groom	23 Years	Color	White
Color of Groom	White	Single, Widowed or Divorced	Single
Single, Widowed or Divorced	Single	Maiden Name, if a Widow	Jennie Wilson
Maiden Name, if a Widow	Jennie Wilson	Birthplace	Russia
Birthplace	Russia	Father's Name	Bernard Wilson
Father's Name	Bernard Wilson	Mother's Maiden Name	Fannie Kaban
Mother's Maiden Name	Fannie Kaban	Number of Bride's Marriage	

I hereby certify that the above-named groom and bride were joined in Marriage by me, in accordance with the laws of the State of New York, at 12 Ave. B (Street), in the Borough of Manhattan, City of New York, this 9 of June 1910

Signature of person performing the Ceremony: Isaac Belenkin
Official Station: 12 Ave. B

Jennie Wilson and Max Zebulsky's Marriage Certificate (front)

WE hereby certify that we are the Groom and Bride named in this Certificate, and that the information given therein is correct, to the best of our knowledge and belief.

BUREAU OF RECORDS
RECEIVED
JUN 17 1910
BUREAU OF MANHATTAN

Max Zebulsky Groom
Jennie Wilson Bride

Isaac Belenkin
and
Max Belinsky

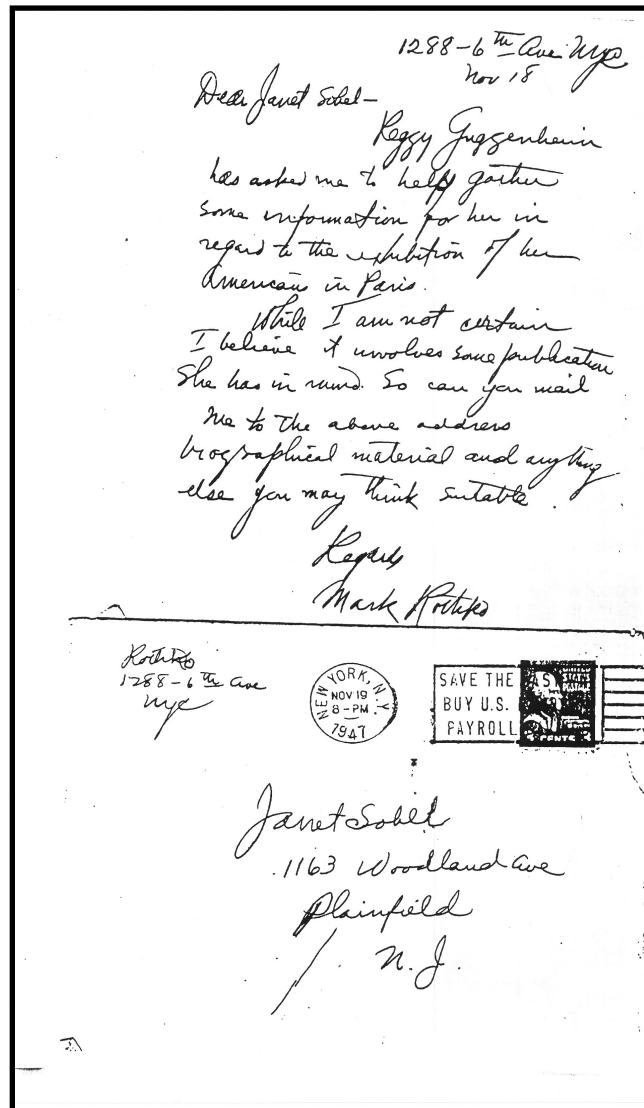
It shall be the duty of the clergymen, magistrates and other persons who perform the marriage ceremony to keep a registry of the marriages celebrated by them. Every person authorized by law to perform the marriage ceremony shall register his or her name and address in the office of the Bureau of Records (Sec. 108, Sanitary Code). It shall be the duty of every person required to make or keep any such registry, of every marriage to present to the Bureau of Records a copy of such registry signed by such person within ten days after the marriage which shall thereupon be placed on file in the said Bureau (Sec. 101, Sanitary Code). N. B.—Sec. 1880, Chap. 468, Laws of 1901, makes the failure to report within ten days a written copy of the registry of the marriages provided to be registered a misdemeanor, punishable by fine or imprisonment.

Jennie Wilson and Max Zebulsky's Marriage Certificate (back)

Will the Real Janet Sobel Please Stand Up?

Mark Rothko's Letter

Click on the image below to return to the Documents page.

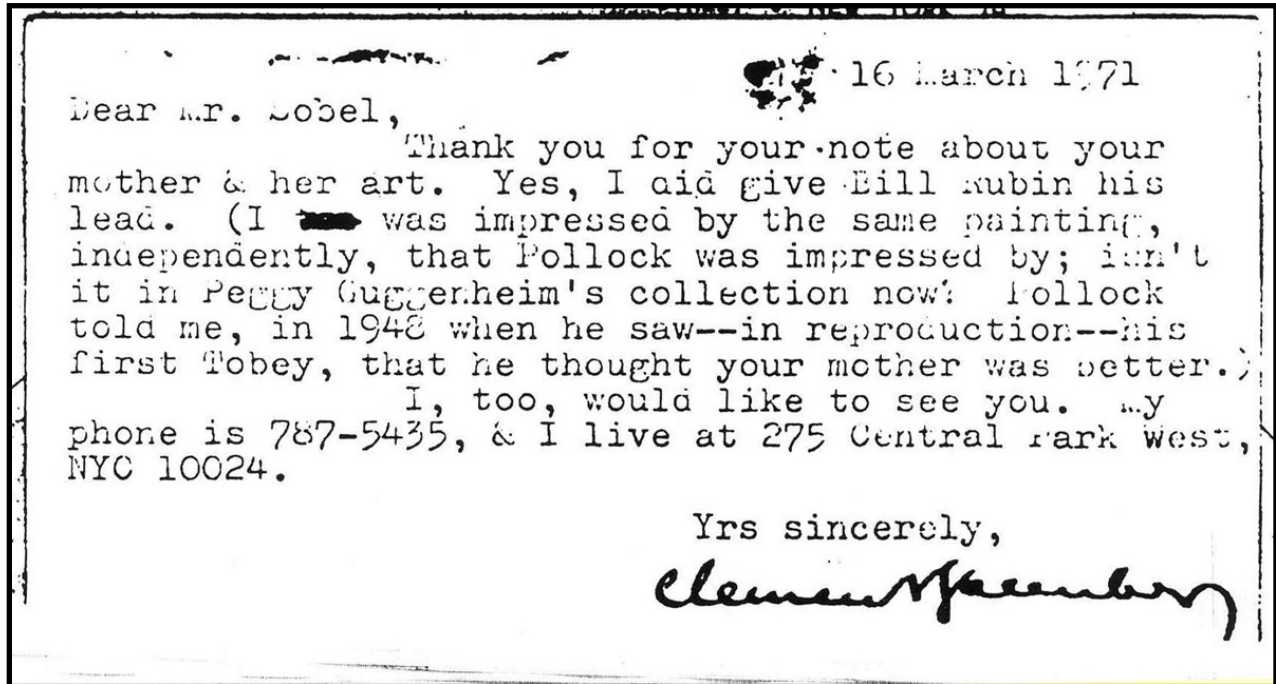


Mark Rothko's letter to Janet Sobel

Will the Real Janet Sobel Please Stand Up?

Clement Greenberg's Postcard

Click on the image below to return to the Documents page.



Clement Greenberg's postcard to Sol Sobel

Will the Real Janet Sobel Please Stand Up?

Social Security Application

Click on the image below to return to the Documents page.

Form SS-5 (Revised 7-46) APPLICATION FOR SOCIAL SECURITY ACCOUNT NUMBER
TREASURY DEPARTMENT INTERNAL REVENUE SERVICE
REQUIRED UNDER THE FEDERAL INSURANCE CONTRIBUTIONS ACT
READ INSTRUCTIONS ON BACK BEFORE FILLING IN FORM

number hidden

DO NOT WRITE IN THE ABOVE SPACE

FILL IN EACH ITEM. PRINT IN BLACK OR DARK BLUE INK OR USE TYPEWRITER FOR ALL ITEMS EXCEPT SIGNATURE. IF THE INFORMATION CALLED FOR IN ANY ITEM IS NOT KNOWN, WRITE "UNKNOWN."

1 PRINT NAME YOU GAVE YOUR PRESENT EMPLOYER, OR IF UNEMPLOYED, THE NAME YOU WILL USE WHEN EMPLOYED FIRST NAME MIDDLE NAME (IF YOU USE NO MIDDLE NAME OR INITIAL, DRAW A LINE →) LAST NAME	JANET OLE SOBEL	
2 MAILING ADDRESS (NO. AND ST., P. O. BOX, OR RFD) (CITY) (ZONE) (STATE) 1171 Woodland Ave. Plainfield N.J.	3 PRINT FULL NAME GIVEN YOU AT BIRTH JENNIE Olechovsky	
4 AGE ON LAST BIRTHDAY 60	5 DATE OF BIRTH (MONTH) (DAY) (YEAR) MAY 31 1893	6 PLACE OF BIRTH (CITY) (COUNTY) (STATE) RUSSIA
7 FATHER'S FULL NAME, REGARDLESS OF WHETHER LIVING OR DEAD Baruch Olechovsky	8 MOTHER'S FULL NAME BEFORE EVER MARRIED, REGARDLESS OF WHETHER LIVING OR DEAD FANNIE Kinchuk	
9 (MARK (X) WHICH) SEX: MALE <input type="checkbox"/> FEMALE <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	10 COLOR (MARK (X) WHICH) (IF OTHER, SPECIFY) OR RACE: WHITE <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NEGRO <input type="checkbox"/> OTHER <input type="checkbox"/>	HAVE YOU EVER BEFORE APPLIED FOR OR HAD A SOCIAL SECURITY OR RAILROAD RETIREMENT NUMBER? YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DON'T KNOW <input type="checkbox"/>
BUSINESS NAME OF EMPLOYER. IF UNEMPLOYED, WRITE "UNEMPLOYED" 12 SOBEL BROTHERS, INC. EMPLOYER'S ADDRESS (NO. AND STREET) (CITY) (ZONE) (STATE) 400 BARCLAY ST. PERTH AMBOY, N.J.	11 IF ANSWER IS "YES" PRINT THE STATE IN WHICH YOU FIRST APPLIED AND WHEN STATE: NJ-NO ALSO PRINT YOUR ACCOUNT NUMBER IF YOU KNOW IT ACCOUNT NUMBER: 438800	
13 TODAY'S DATE Dec. 7, 1953	14 WRITE YOUR NAME AS USUALLY WRITTEN (DO NOT PRINT) Janet Sobel	

25-5020-9 RETURN COMPLETED APPLICATION TO NEAREST SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION FIELD OFFICE
Please Notify Employer

DO NOT WRITE IN THIS SPACE

Janet Sobel's Social Security Application

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1. William S. Rubin, “Jackson Pollock and the Modern Tradition, Part 3: Cubism and the Later Evolution of the All-Over Style,” *Artforum* 5 (April 1967): 18–31.
2. Ann Eden Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997).
3. Jeffrey Wechsler, essay for *Abstract Expressionism: Other Dimensions; An Introduction to Small Scale Painterly Abstraction in America, 1940–1965*, the catalog of the exhibition Wechsler organized at the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University, 1989).
4. Deborah A. Goldberg, article in *American National Biography*, ed. John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), s.v. vol. 20, “Sobel, Janet,” 351–53.
5. Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism*.
6. Wechsler, essay for *Abstract Expressionism*, 104.
7. Rubin, “Jackson Pollock and the Modern Tradition,” 29.
8. “Services Held for Mrs. Sobel,” *Plainfield (NJ) Courier-News*, November 12, 1968, 25.
9. In return for his initial generosity, I later provided Gary Snyder with copies of several documents that I had searched for and located. The first of these was Janet and Max Sobel’s marriage certificate; Snyder promised me that I would be identified as the source of these documents in whatever writings sponsored by him mentioned them and their findings.
10. Gail Levin, essay for *Inside Out: Selected Works by Janet Sobel*, the catalog of Janet Sobel’s solo exhibition at Gary Snyder Fine Art, New York, February 1–March 22, 2003.
11. Gail Levin, “Janet Sobel: Primitivist, Surrealist, and Abstract Expressionist,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 26, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2005): 8–14, pls. 5–8.
12. *Ibid.*, 8.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, 13.

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Please click on note numbers to return to text page.

19. Ibid.

20. Registrar Exhibition Files, Exh. #930. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. The writer thanks MacKenzie Bennett, assistant archivist, and Kevin Madill, assistant librarian, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, for their help in documenting this 1970 *Recent Acquisitions* exhibition.

21. Levin, "Janet Sobel," 13n17.

22. Ibid., 12.

23. David Porter, comp., *Personal Statement, Painting Prophecy, 1950* (Washington, DC: The Gallery press, 1945).

24. Ibid. foreword.

25. Ibid.

26. Levin, "Janet Sobel," 12, 14n49.

27. Ibid., 12.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid., 14n49.

30. Siobhán M. Conaty, essay in *Art of This Century: The Women*, the catalog of the exhibition Conaty guest curated at the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, East Hampton, NY, and the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice (n.p.: Stony Brook Foundation/Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1997). Helen Harrison, director of the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, generously gave me a copy of this catalog.

31. Ibid., 16, 17, 21. Conaty usually identifies this exhibition as *Exhibition by 31 Women*, but occasionally she refers to it as *Exhibition of 31 Women*.

32. Ibid., 21.

33. Levin, "Janet Sobel," 11.

34. Ibid., 14n43.

35. Peggy Guggenheim, *Out of This Century: Confessions of an Art Addict*, foreword by Gore Vidal, introduction by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. (New York: Universe Books, 1979), 324.

36. Ibid., 314.

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Please click on note numbers to return to text page.

37. Levin, “Janet Sobel,” 14n43.
38. Peggy Guggenheim, *Out of This Century: The Informal Memoirs of Peggy Guggenheim* (New York: Dial Press, 1946).
39. Peggy Guggenheim, *Out of This Century: Confessions of an Art Addict*; see note 30 above.
40. Conaty, essay in *Art of This Century: The Women*, 21, 21n22.
41. *Ibid.*, 21, 41–43.
42. Levin, “Janet Sobel,” 9.
43. *Ibid.*, 13n17.
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*, 13.
46. *Ibid.*
47. *Ibid.*
48. Porter, *Personal Statement, Painting Prophecy, 1950*.
49. *Ibid.*
50. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1995 introduction to *Life Is with People: The Culture of the Shtetl*, by Mark Zborowyski and Elizabeth Herzog, foreword by Margaret Mead (New York: Schocken Books, 1962; International Universities Press, 1952), ix. While completing this Web site, I was amused to read that Professor Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, as Sol Sobel had done with his mother, had encouraged her seventy-three-year-old father, Mayer Kirshenblatt, to begin to paint. Now ninety-two, Mayer Kirshenblatt has just had a solo exhibition at the Jewish Museum of his paintings of his birthplace, the pre-Holocaust Polish city of Opatow, where he spent his childhood before emigrating to Canada with his family; and a book of his paintings and writings has just been published, all largely due to the encouragement and promotion of his daughter Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. Mayer Kirshenblatt’s story is recounted by Roberta Smith in her article “From Memory to Canvas, Lost Way of Life in Poland,” *The New York Times*, May 8, 2009, C22, C28.
51. Goldberg, article in *American National Biography*, 353.

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Please click on note numbers to return to text page.

52. Levin, “Janet Sobel,” 12.
53. Franz Meyer, *Marc Chagall*, trans. Robert Allen (New York: Harry N. Abrams, n.d.), 41.
54. Ibid.
55. Levin, “Janet Sobel,” 12.
56. Meyer, 610 “New York and Mexico” n4.
57. Goldberg, article in *American National Biography*, 352; Levin, “Janet Sobel,” 11; and Guggenheim, *Out of This Century: Confessions of an Art Addict*.
58. Levin, essay for *Inside Out*, 7nn. xviii, xxi; Levin, “Janet Sobel,” 14n31. In her essay for *Inside Out*, Gail Levin spelled Waylande Gregory’s first name correctly and incorrectly (Wayland); two years later, in her *WAJ* article, Levin settled on a single spelling, the incorrect “Wayland.”
59. Waylande Gregory, “Plainfield’s Primitive Painter,” *Art in Living*, *Plainfield (NJ) Courier-News*, January 6, 1962.
60. “Max Sobel, 63, Jewelry Manufacturer,” obituary, *Plainfield (NJ) Courier-News*, November 25, 1953.
61. Ibid. The obituary misspelled the Sobels’ daughter Lillian’s married name, which was Mrs. Robert Bass.
62. “Pearls to Adorn Milady Turned Out by the Millions at Local Industry,” *Perth Amboy (NJ) Evening News*, May 3, 1947.
63. *Brooklyn (NY) Eagle*, April 24, 1944.
64. Rubin, “Jackson Pollock and the Modern Tradition,” 29.
65. Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga*, first Harper Perennial edition (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1989; New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), 524–26, 873nn. Page references to the Harper Perennial edition.
66. “List of Registered Voters for the Year 1941,” Borough of Brooklyn, 2nd Assembly District, 77th Election District: 3260 Coney Island Avenue, *Supplement to The City Record*, New York, October 16, 1941.

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67. Janet Sobel's Application for Social Security Account Number dated December 7, 1953; see also Goldberg, article in *American National Biography*, 352.

68. *Brooklyn (NY) Eagle*, November 10, 1946.

69. Gregory, "Plainfield's Primitive Painter."

70. Levin, "Janet Sobel," 10.

71. "Superfund Emergency Response, Actions Library," demonstration pages of Potomac River Media, <http://www.rivermedia.com/consulting/er/hazsubs/sitelib/2cea.htm> (accessed July 8, 2001).

72. Gregory, "Plainfield's Primitive Painter."

73. Ibid.

74. U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census, "Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910—Population," census place: Manhattan Ward 17, New York, New York; roll: T624_1031; page: 7B; enumeration district: 1675; image: 922, <http://www.ancestry.com>.

75. Goldberg, article in *American National Biography*, 351; Leah Sobel and Sol Sobel, fax to author, January 22, 2001.

76. Levin, "Janet Sobel," 10.

77. National Archives and Records Administration, Northeast Region (New York City), Immigrant and Passenger Arrivals on Microfilm.

78. Gregory, "Plainfield's Primitive Painter."

79. Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism*, 186.

80. Levin, "Janet Sobel," 14n24.

81. *Morton Allan Directory of European Passenger Steamship Arrivals for the Years 1890 to 1930 at the Port of New York and for the Years 1904 to 1926 at the Ports of New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Baltimore* (reprint, Baltimore: Genealogical Pub. Co., 2001; New York: Immigration Information Bureau, 1931); <http://www.theshipslist.com/ships/lines/index.htm>.

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82. “Biographical Names,” *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Springfield, Mass., Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 2003), 1509.
83. Woodrow Wilson was president of Princeton University from 1902 to 1910; www.woodrowwilsonhouse.org/index.asp?section=woodrowwilson&file=educator.
84. *Brooklyn (NY) Eagle*, November 10, 1946.
85. Ibid.
86. Emily Cheney, “Only Human,” *NY Daily Mirror*, May 10, 1944.
87. Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism*, 186; Goldberg, article in *American National Biography*, 351.
88. Levin, “Janet Sobel,” 12.
89. Janet Sobel’s mother’s name is usually spelled “Fannie,” as on her tombstone, on Janet’s marriage certificate, and on Janet’s Social Security account application, but it is sometimes spelled “Fanny,” as in Deborah A. Goldberg’s article in *American National Biography*, 351.
90. Levin, “Janet Sobel,” 9, 14n24.
91. Ibid., 14n24.
92. Goldberg, article in *American National Biography*, 351.
93. “Max Sobel, 63, Jewelry Manufacturer,” obituary.
94. Levin, “Janet Sobel,” 10.
95. “Services Held for Mrs. Sobel,” *Plainfield (NJ) Courier-News*.
96. Gregory, “Plainfield’s Primitive Painter.”
97. “Services Held for Mrs. Sobel,” *Plainfield (NJ) Courier-News*.
98. Goldberg, article in *American National Biography*, 352.