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Thinking about the 1940s, Hilla Rebay and the Guggenheim
By Dorothy Koppelman

I was very pleased to read the history of Hilla Rebay by Judy de Zanger, in the recent ASCA newsletter and it recalled those times for me, some memories I am so glad to think about now.

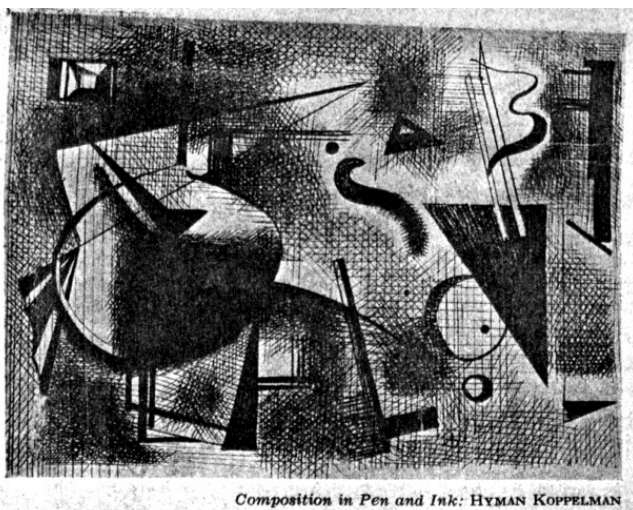
One of the artists who worked at the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, on 54th Street was among the really fortunate artists named in the Joan Lukach biography of Hilla Rebay—he was then Hyman Koppelman. His job was to be a sort of care-taker, like other artists who were on the payroll—some as caretakers, some as docents, but all were supported, in keeping with Hilla Rebay's and Solomon Guggenheim's purpose to further the work of young artists of a certain kind. Each one had to submit a "non-objective" work to be owned by the museum. Hilla Rebay was passionate about intuition and feeling in art, and no relation to seen structure, so abstract did not suit her as a descriptive word, but Chaim's work was abstract, and so were the other artists' submissions. That work is still there, and I imagine works by many others not as well known as Pollock, etc. He had studied with Carl Holty, and though that was not his particular bent, he enjoyed doing the drawings he did during the time he worked at the museum.

I visited him after hours at the museum, and I marveled at the music, Bach, played throughout all the floors; the many Rudolf Bauer paintings on every wall it seemed, and the luxurious grey velvet benches. It happens that I was just getting acquainted with this young artist, who drew wonderfully, and if one remembers the plight of artists then, right after the WPA days, one can readily understand how very impressed I was by his actually having a job in an actual museum.

Hilla Rebay was generous, as Joan Lukach points out. And faithfully, she did send a \$15 check to artists as a stipend for their work.

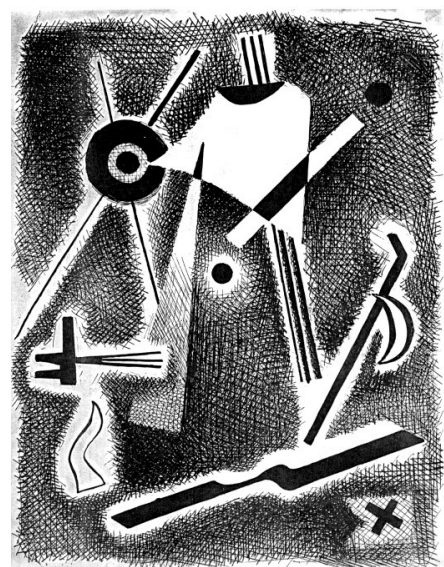
Chaim and I married during WWII and I have since kept the many letters Hilla Rebay wrote to my husband about how to take care of his health—she was very intense on the subject. She suggested many remedies for ill health and things to eat. She also wrote him excitedly that she had hired a young architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, to design a new museum, and told him of events planned for the museum. We have since donated the letters to the Guggenheim and one abstract pen and ink drawing.

Since the past is very present to me these days, I looked into my files and found a reproduction of one drawing from an article in a Feb. 15, 1952 article in the *Art Digest*. I liked the drawing even now, though Chaim did not continue in that abstract manner.



Composition in Pen and Ink: HYMAN KOPPELMAN

*Reproduced in an article about the 1942
Museum of Non-Objective Painting Exhibition*



A SURPRISE! As I continued to look at the article and the reproduction, I saw that it was different from the one later given to the Guggenheim. Therefore, there must have been more than one for those monthly stipends. Likely both are in the collection and those of other recipients of monthly checks.

I am sure there could be a fine exhibition of the works of Lucia Autorino, Robert DeNiro, Sr., John Sennhauser, Attilio Salemme, Irene Rice-Pereira and others are there—Bolotowski, Balcombe Greene, Ward Jackson, who continued to work at the Guggenheim for many years.

The WWII correspondence is not included in the Lukach biography, unfortunately, still it is in the museum's archives, as well as some in the Archives of American Art.

Hilla Rebay's own work was very interesting, and I know that Chaim admired it, and felt it was better than Rudolf Bauer's.

To go back a little, those days were some of the most important in my life. Through Chaim I was introduced to the poetry of Eli Siegel (*Hot Afternoons Have Been in Montana*) and the philosophy he founded, Aesthetic Realism.

Now, I am reconstructing some of what I am realizing were the pivotal periods and events, the ways of seeing that inform an artist's work and life. The Hilla Rebay philosophy, with its accent on feeling and intuition, and not on forms of reality seen, did not appeal to many young artists then. And Carl Holty's abstract instruction though valuable, did not go deep enough. Chaim was looking for something deeper and wider, and he found it as he began to attend the poetry classes conducted by Eli Siegel. When I visited him at the Museum of Non-Objective Art, he told me about those classes, what he was learning and his deep joy at a new expression in his work. I saw very soon that what Chaim has often said was true, Aesthetic Realism is a criterion true for all time, all place, for seeing and judging all art—what was good and what was not. What happened in the succeeding years is a great history, and these are the beginnings.

I felt, in perhaps a tenuous way, another relation to the beginnings of the Guggenheim, since I opened the Terrain Gallery as its first director in 1955, the same decade as the planned Solomon Guggenheim Museum. The motto of the Terrain Gallery is Eli Siegel's Aesthetic Realism statement: "*In reality opposites are one; art shows this.*" That principle is, in my opinion intellect supreme. The artists who drew back from Hilla Rebay's "*no meaning, no intellect...*" were glad to know this.

Rolph Scarlett was one of the earliest artists who enthusiastically spoke about the value of the Aesthetic Realism way of seeing art. His training at the Guggenheim led him to look further. In his conversations with me, he said he was so glad to see there really was a true key to how to look at and judge art, and he attended Mr. Siegel's talks on art. The Terrain still shows his works.

It happens that Chaim and I continued to know many of the artists we met then and many showed at the Terrain Gallery during its first years. Irene Rice Periera often visited and spoke of the neglect suffered by women artists--Lester Johnson, Ibram Lassaw, John von Wicht, Ad Reinhardt, and Leon Polk Smith all were in Terrain shows, as was Ward Jackson. Harold Krisel had a one-man silk-screen show at the Terrain; and his work is on the walls now in the exhibition, "*Surface to Begin With.*"

The "Art of Tomorrow" makes the past more alive for me. Ms. de Zanger's writing gave me a push to look at things in my files and to fill in places in time more vividly, to see things newly. I really appreciate that. Thank you, Dorothy Koppelman.

The Print*

Can dark and light
Show wrong and right?
—And round and straight
Show love and hate?
—And dim and clear
Show hope and fear?

Eli Siegel

* Reprinted from *Hail, American Development*, Definition Press.