

Shirley Shapiro Zwang

Danbury, Connecticut

"I feel a great warmth for the Jewish people. I believe that, as Jews, we have made a tremendous contribution to civilization with our philosophy, tenets, and courage. I see us as a majority and not a minority, because of our wonderful contributions to the world," says Shirley Zwang, whose own contribution spans many media. As a sculptor she works in terra cotta, porcelain, and bronze. In two-dimensional art, she uses paint, silk screen, and collage. In the Danbury community she engages in the art of volunteer work with the Jewish Federation. And in all of these media, Zwang explores the heart of the Jew—whether that of a Biblical character like Esther or that of real "characters" like rabbis involved in debate. Jewish art, she says, should focus on "the human aspect of a given moment of Jewish experience. It is the 'divine moment' when a gesture can tell the entire story."

A graduate of the New York High School of Music and Art, Zwang received a degree in illustration from Pratt Institute. After her children were grown, she took a degree in Professional Studies in Studio Art from the State University of New York. She studied sculpture with the late Hana Geber and in Mexico furthered her knowledge of bronze casting.

Why does she create Jewish art? "Jewish life is my life," she explains. "My life revolves around the Jewish calendar, stories of the past, holiday dinners, celebrations, familiar music, life cycle events."

The artist goes on to note that "Jewish life has basically not changed in many centuries. The only thing that has changed is the vernacular: the way we view ourselves, the styles in art, and the materials and techniques available to us." These she enjoys exploring. Each piece begins when a reading or an event spurs a visual and emotional image. The artist says she then chooses "whichever medium lets me express myself most completely. I have no favorite medium."



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Lamed-Vav Sculpture, by Shirley Shapiro Zwang. Cast bronze, on black mica, 9 x 4 x 3". The Hebrew letters lamed and vav have the numerical value of 36, or twice chai. A tradition arising from the Talmud holds that at any given time, 36 people sustain the world through their quietly righteous acts. Thus, ornaments and presentation pieces honoring a person for acts of great goodness may use this motif. The pomegranate is symbolic of bounty and fruitfulness.