

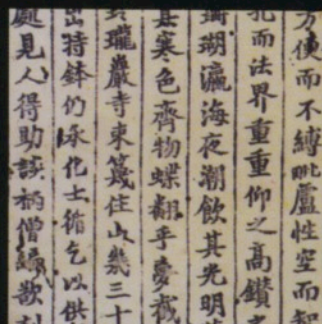
Letter Arts Review

LETTER ARTS REVIEW 26:1 · Thomas Ingmire and Manuel Neri: Visual conversation · Marian Bantjes—The rational ornamentalist
The restoration and conservation of Japanese calligraphy · A conversation with Barbara Wolff



PSALM 104 (PANEL 1) · WHO APPOINTED THE MOON FOR SEASONS · Barbara Wolff

\$14.50



תולדות האדם
האדם והחיות



האדם והחיות
תולדות האדם

A CONVERSATION WITH BARBARA WOLFF

By Holly Cohen · Rich layers of platinum, gold and silver illuminations shimmer alongside painstaking details of the natural world in miniatures created by artist Barbara Wolff. Barbara was asked to recreate pages of the fourteenth century Prato Haggadah for the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and a page of the fifteenth century Rothschild Miscellany for the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. Both projects included the filming of Barbara working on manuscript pages to show how an illuminator would have worked centuries ago. Yet gilding and working on vellum are relatively recent skills in her long artistic career.

Barbara has illustrated books for the Time-Life Nature Library and the Golden Nature Guides as well as other publishers, and her numerous clients include The New York Botanical Gardens and Hoffmann-LaRoche. She has exhibited at The NY Horticultural Society and Yeshiva University Museum, amongst others. She recently completed a series of ten illuminations based on the 104th Psalm.

On a late fall morning Barbara welcomed me into her studio and home in an old stately pre-war building on New York City's Upper West Side. Inside the apartment where she lives with her husband Rudi, himself an artist, hallways covered

with artwork lead to high-ceilinged rooms with book-lined walls, studios, and even a music room which on the day of my visit was set up for a cello recital to be given by her son. We began talking in the dining room.

Where did you study art? Can you tell me about your background?

Basically I'm self-taught. I studied at Hunter College. But art was a minor, it wasn't my major. I had some good drawing classes and some wonderful sculpture classes, and there was a marvelous printmaker named Gabor Peterdi with the same turn of mind, so I did a lot of etching. I loved sculpture, but I knew I was never going to be a sculptor.

But this is very close to it. Working with gesso, which is primarily plaster and glue, feels very much like sculpture. I can work into it, I can carve it, I can even push it around before it sets completely, so it feels like clay to me and is very attractive to use. I know that many people don't like to use gesso because it's quirky stuff. It never quite does the same thing twice.

But as you will discover, I love the process. It's so unpredictable. And I think that is the excitement, not knowing exactly where you are a lot of the time and having to improvise often.

OPPOSITE
Psalm 104, Panel 1
Who Stretches out the
Universe (104:1)





When did your career as an artist begin?

For a short time after college I taught fourth grade. When I met Rudi he looked at some of my drawings and he said, "That's crazy, you should be doing this." So we put together a portfolio, and I went out, got a job, and that was it. I worked at *McCalls Magazine*, I worked for a designer, I did some freelance work for the Museum of Natural History. I was offered a staff job there which I didn't take, and I regretted it for the longest time. But then I freelanced for years. I started to do illuminations about ten years ago.

Illuminations...

Yes. Growing up in New York your backyard can be the Metropolitan Museum of Art or the Morgan Library, and their illuminated manuscripts were what I loved to see. So I would see whatever show had manuscripts. Over the years their collections became familiar friends. But I never thought past that. I really didn't know very much about how they were created.

About ten years ago *Kremer Pigments* was offering a course in medieval manuscript illumination, one day of which was going to be devoted to working on skin, on parchment, and I always wanted to know more about that.

I thought that the rest of the course would not interest me in the slightest. But it just changed my life. It was just an absolutely natural fit. I took to gesso and gilding and working with those odd, natural materials. I brought home the two little pieces that I did in class and Rudi said, "You know this is your new career."

I had spent most of my career doing natural science illustration and specialized in botanical illustration.

It's been an interesting change of career for me. But when you think about it, the change is not all that profound. I always focused on exact, small, precious details, and my work always involved depicting the natural world. I'm a detail person and I always have been.

Oh—I have to tell you a funny story about detail. It happened a very long time ago when Rudi and I were first married. I think this was our first argument, which will tell you a lot about me and detail. We were on vacation on Nantucket. To get there involved a long drive and an almost four-hour ferry ride. On our first day there we biked to the far side of the island where the dunes overlook the ocean to spend the day sketching. We parked our bikes, Rudi took his sketch pad and went off to draw, and I found a good spot and

OPPOSITE

Psalm 104, Panel 2
And the Mountains Rose
(104:5-8)

ABOVE LEFT

Psalm 104, Panel 3
Among the Branches
They Sing (104:12)

ABOVE RIGHT

Psalm 104, Panel 4
To Bring Forth Grass
(104:14)



settled down to work. About an hour, an hour and a half, later Rudi came over to see what I was doing, he looked down and said, "It took us a whole day to get to Nantucket, we traveled all the way across the island and what are you painting? Two shells and a pebble?"

And so in salty language I told him to go mind his own business. His answer was "This is ridiculous. There's this whole ocean out there and you're painting two shells and a pebble."

The next day he bought a book in the bookshop. It was a volume of Blake for me, and let's see if I can remember it... *To see a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wild flower* and something about infinity in the palm of your hand... we made up. But that's me you know. If there are details to be done, I'll do them.

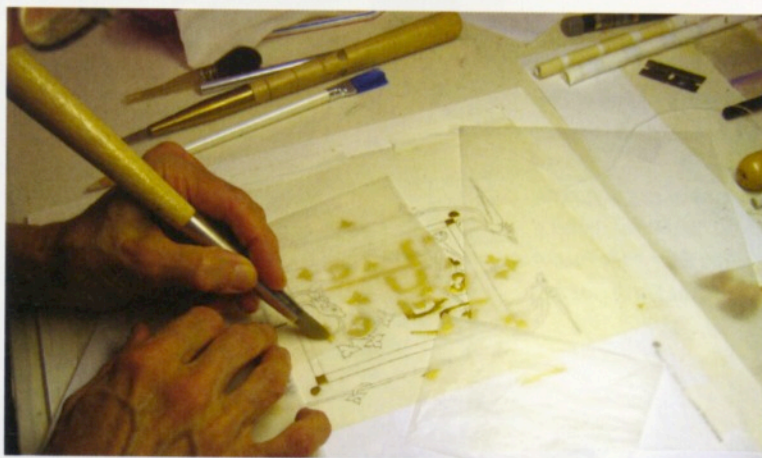
And Judaica? Has that always been an important part of your work?

It's always been an important part of my life but not my work. But it just seemed to be an absolutely perfect fit, especially when I got involved with learning more about manuscripts. I wanted to know more about Hebrew manuscripts and discovered there aren't very many. There probably were not that many to begin with, many have been destroyed, and the few that are beautifully illuminated you can count on both hands; there are maybe ten or twelve really great illuminated Hebrew books. I don't think any of them are as great as some of the great Latin books, but their illumination is really a part of a great tradition. A lot of the Hebrew manuscripts were done by Christian illuminators, and I'm sure the reverse was true. There certainly must have been some Jews working in those workshops, though they could not join the guilds.

Can you tell me about the Prato Haggadah project?

In 2005 I went to see Sharon Mintz, the curator of The Jewish Theological Seminary's art collection, and I showed her and the head conservator there some of my work. They told me about the Prato Haggadah, one of the great treasures of the Seminary's collection. They had just spent the last three years conserving it. It had been completely unbound, and they were able to work on every single page. It was a book that was well used but never finished. All the text had been written, all of the illuminations outlined, some pages have just the gesso areas, some were already gilded, and some of the pages were complete. You could see the whole process of making the illuminations for this manuscript.

The Seminary was planning an exhibit of the



complete restored and unbound manuscript and to show how a manuscript book was made. Because the Metropolitan Museum had done a scientific study of the manuscript to identify what materials and colors were probably used, the conservator suggested I recreate two of the unfinished pages based on the original to give the public a sense of what they might look like if they had been completed.

Getting the purple was quite the adventure, wasn't it?

And that's where that purple story comes in. The analysis that the Met did for the purple color just stated that it was organic, but they couldn't say exactly what organic pigment it was. For blue they could say it was a copper mineral, and then I knew it was azurite; the green contained copper so I knew it was verdigris; and I could tell what was red lead and the white lead, but the purple just said organic, so I figured the red could be either brazil wood, or Kermes. The blue had to be another organic material, so it could be indigo or the other purple made from a plant called *turnsole*.

Many ancient artist's recipe books had instructions for making that color, and some

ABOVE
The artist painting; the artist burnishing gold.

OPPOSITE
The Prato Haggadah: a page from the original manuscript, above, and new pages by the artist showing how unfinished pages of the manuscript might have looked if they had been finished.

THIS PAGE
Psalm 104, Panel 5
Wine that Maketh Glad
the Heart of Man (104:15)

OPPOSITE TOP
Psalm 104, Panel 7
The Earth is Full of Thy
Creatures (104:24)

OPPOSITE BOTTOM
Psalm 104, Panel 9
You Renew the Face of
the Earth (104:30)



books said the plant came from southern France. I knew the Latin name of the plant, and just trolling around the internet I found a reference in a nineteenth century book written by an English explorer in the Middle Eastern lands. The entire book was online, and I found that it had list of plants found in the land of Midian. I quickly looked up Midian to find it in the area which is now Jordan, and I thought, "Oh, this is beginning to make sense. It might have grown in Israel too."

I went to the website of the Jerusalem Botanical Garden. There they have listed every plant growing in Israel along with great pictures, and I found the plant. Right then, though it was late at night, I emailed the head scientist and asked if he knew anything about this plant. I got an answer the next morning. He said, this is the most common summer weed, do you want me to collect some for you? I thought this would be very nice, but that plant material would never be allowed into this country.

Rudi's oldest brother who's a farmer in the north of Israel was coming to visit us, and I decided to enlist him. I prepared linen cloths that were soaked in lime water or in lye and made a diagram of instructions like a little comic book for him. Later in August when he went out into the fields he searched for that plant, and by the time it got to be October I think he had the entire northern corner of Israel on the lookout for *Chrozophora tinctoria*. He used a garlic press to squeeze the juice from those berries onto the cloths.

Didn't you also make ink from pomegranate skins?

There's an interesting book, in French, on medieval inks in the reference section of the 42nd Street Library. I went down there with my French dictionary to copy out a couple of recipes that I thought could have been used in Northern Spain. A number of them had pomegranate skins as a

major ingredient. I love the way it was just the right time of year for pomegranates. I cooked the pomegranate skins in distilled water, added some iron sulfate, a little gum arabic and a bit of honey to make a slightly brownish black ink. I still have some in the fridge.

And the Hebrew letters?

They're drawn. I used a pen to outline them and a brush to fill in. It would have been easier if I knew how to do the calligraphy. I had the lettering of the original manuscript so I had a very good example and could follow that closely.

Did you use a pointed nib?

It was probably a standard crow quill point. What interests me about this whole field is that there is always something to search for, and I went in search of real crow quills. My son, an avid fly fisherman, suggested suppliers of fishing flies. I did find someone who sent me an entire dried crow wing, but there was no way I could do anything with it. But I did find real crow quills in England on eBay. I bought a handful of crow quills, but it is something else to try to get the hot sand into the tiny barrel of a crow's quill.

How did the Rothschild Miscellany project for the Israel Museum come about?

The curators at the Israel Museum had seen my film on the making of the Prato Haggadah [*Illuminating History: the Making of a Manuscript*. The film Barbara made for the Jewish Theological Seminary]. For their new manuscript galleries they asked me to produce a similar film using an illumination from their Rothschild Miscellany.

What kind of gold leaf do you use?

I don't really know if there's a big difference in brands, but I have been using Monarch. They have a good range of colors, and I generally use their 23.75k Rosanoble or their 24k.

And the shell gold?

For shell, I have to plan ahead. I buy a vial of the powder, and I grind it finer using coarse salt, honey and a little water. It takes a long time—hours—to get it fine enough. So I grind it for a while, put it in the refrigerator, and when I have an hour or two of time I take it out and grind some more. I guess it takes about six or seven hours' worth of grinding to get a really fine gold powder.

When it's done, when I've had enough of grinding, it looks like a container of sort of sticky mustard. I mix it with distilled water, pour it into a larger container, let the gold settle, pour that





ABOVE
Pigments in the refrigerator, carefully labeled as poisons.

OPPOSITE
Pigments and tools; below, making verdigris.

water off, and add more water until the water with the gold powder no longer tastes sweet or salty. I save the water I've used because the gold keeps settling out of it for several days.

We turn to the 104th Psalm. A large box lies open on the wooden dining table. Inside, each piece of art is carefully wrapped in glassine which Barbara uncovers to reveal, one after another, the ten illuminations in the series, each one glimmering beneath white matting. A clock ticks tranquilly as she discusses her work.

I see this psalm as a hymn to the divine in nature. For these illuminations I began with the text, and sometimes the text became the framework for the art, an integral part of it. In some of the others, it is there to tell you where you are in the psalm.

How did you write the Hebrew letters here?

Again, I use drawn lettering. It is not done as calligraphy but as a part of the painting, as are a flower, an insect, a sunset. I was inspired by some of Ismar David's work, especially the modern hands.

1. Who Stretches out the Universe (104:1)

This psalm begins with the psalmists' vision of the cosmos. I saw it as a description of the universe itself. I've included the aurora, the Milky Way, the Morning Star, and shooting stars. And here I used platinum. I don't find it pleasant to work with. It is stiff and thicker than gold leaf and can separate from the gesso if I use many layers of leaf. Then it becomes stronger than the glue in the gesso.

2. And the Mountains Rose (104:5-8)

This part of the psalm describes a journey through geologic time. The waters cover the earth, they are ordered to recede and the mountains rise. This is an example of where I used the lettering as a part of the design. I worked it as layers in the geological folds. Here I was really able to carve the trilobites and ammonites and then treat the floral shapes as if they were pressed into the layers. This illumination contains three shades of gold: a red gold, a lemon gold and my favorite, almost 24 karat. I've used silver for the water and coated it, so hopefully it won't tarnish.

What did you coat it with?

I just used an acrylic varnish. I know many people use glair but I think it dulls the silver, and I'm not a purist. You can see the difference between silver and platinum. The silver is actually whiter and feels warmer at the same time. I prefer it, but I am nervous about it tarnishing.

3. Among the Branches They Sing (104:12)

Here I've used platinum for the water. You can see its mirror-like quality and its effect of black and white. Either you have a mirror and it reflects something dark back at you, or it catches the light and it's absolutely white.

I really am a miniaturist at heart. I think I fit 28 different birds into this one. I don't think I can name them all at the moment. These are birds that either are in the land of Israel year-round, or are among the hundreds of millions from three continents that pass over this area each spring and fall.

What did you use to paint the birds?

Winsor and Newton Designer Colors. Gouache. But I mixed it with a bit of water and some of glair. The glair gives the paint a slight sheen, and if you wait a few days it becomes waterproof as well. So that enables me to get very fine glazes of transparent color because I don't pick up the previous layers of paint.

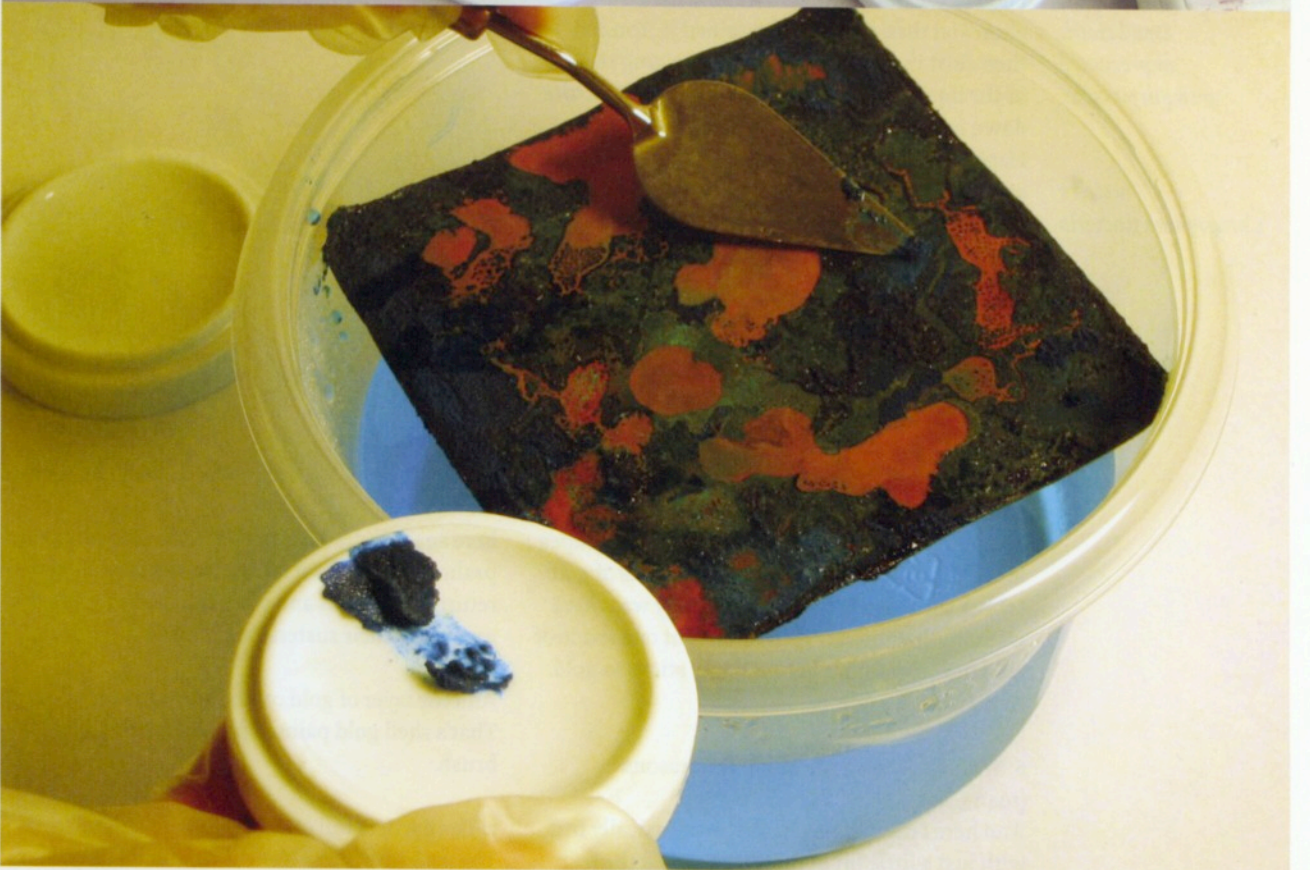
And you're using brushes?

Yes, three zero, two zero.

4. To Bring Forth Grass (104:14)

For this one I dyed the skin with brazil wood. I had always wanted to see what that looked like, and this piece provided the perfect excuse. I used malachite for the green. There are forage grasses and food grains that echo the psalm text.

How did you extract the dye from the brazil wood?





ABOVE
Small cloths
impregnated
with purple color.

RIGHT
Chrozophora tinctoria

I boiled the brazil wood in water with a little alum and then cooled and strained it. You can then shift the range of color by changing the PH of the liquid, adding more or less potash. I wrote down my mixtures when I worked on the Prato Haggadah Project, but I never was able to get the same shades twice. So I just mixed up a big batch of brazil dye, put the skin in to soak, weighed it down with some little polished stones and just kept checking to see if it was dark enough. The crystalline green malachite really pops against the red background.

5. Wine that Maketh Glad the Heart Of Man (104:15)

This was the first one I did in this series and where I decided to go on and do the rest of the psalm. The text becomes the arbor for the grapes here. This also has three different shades of gold. I think the reason I did this originally was that I was told that it's very difficult to put one shade of gold next to another because gold sticks to gold. And I have to say, it is.

6. Who Appointed the Moon for Seasons (104:19-20)

And here I tried to do one that was basically text with just a little bit of illumination. So the text



here again is drawn letters. It's the section of the psalm that speaks of moonrise and sunset, the returning seasons and of all the living beings that must seek their sustenance from God.

And the layer of gold on the bottom?

That's shell gold painted on with a pen and a brush.

7. The Earth is full of Thy Creatures (104:24)

The psalmist marvels at the infinite variety of life

forms. The word used here is *manifold*, and I tried to fit in as many creatures as possible.

8. Leviathan Whom Thou Hast Formed (104:25-26)

The whale is done in platinum, and I don't think I will ever try that expanse of platinum again. These verses about leviathan, a great whale, amazed me. I had no idea that there were whales in the Mediterranean and that there still are. All the sea creatures pictured here are still found in the Mediterranean.

9. You Renew the Face of the Earth (104:30)

These verses speak of an implicit faith in the eternity of creation. I tried to include some representative of almost everything, the mountains, the sea creatures, the land creatures, the birds, all the botany that I could fit and still have it work. And then I tried to have a little fun and include some stories about the raccoon and fish, the chameleon and bees, the rabbit, and the monkey trying to catch a seal. I think some of the pleasure in creating miniatures is that the painter is able to hide things for others to find.

10. I Will Sing Unto the Lord (104:33)

The psalmist concludes with praise and I with patterns. There is a pattern underneath the gold on gold diaper pattern; the letters become another pattern on top. The diaper pattern is pressed in and raised up at the same time, and for that I used a mixture of gum ammoniac and fish glue. Only the letters have a gesso base. These are all wild plants which grew in the land of Israel in the psalmist's time.

Is that silver?

No, that's platinum.

After we finished going through the series, Barbara showed me her studio, a small room with a desk, computer, shelves of books and a full pin-up wall covered with photos and notes and sketches, odds and ends including a peacock feather, plant specimens and a picture of a goat which I immediately asked about.

Oh, that was a birthday card that my son gave me.

From Heifer? That's one of my favorite charities.

Yes. I was so touched. He bought a goat in my name for someone. [Dairy goats as well as other animals can be purchased for poor farming families.] I work on goatskin and my son, Ben, felt that I should have a live goat for a change. I never would have thought of that. What a wonderful idea ... my own goat improving a



family's life somewhere on this earth ... a perfect fit with the sentiment of this psalm.

And the project that you're working on now?

It's very exciting. I'm just sort of overwhelmed with my good fortune. It's a whole Haggadah. Done on calfskin, illuminated throughout. It's a private commission for a family here in New York for whom Passover, the Seder, has been an important family tradition for many generations.

Do you have a deadline?

Yes I do, and it's getting shorter and shorter. It's Passover 2013. The book has been laid out, the text and major illuminations planned, and those are all the thumbnails.

So when you have all the thumbnails do you feel relieved?

No, no, this is the moment of terror! ♦

ABOVE
Psalm 104, Panel 10
I Will Sing Unto the Lord
(104:33)



PSALM 104 (PANEL 8) · LEVIATHAN WHOM THOU HAST FORMED · *Barbara Wolff*