



PRIVATE PRACTICE: While working as a seamstress in Rochester, Josephine Tota created private images that drew on several genres of art history.

RECOVERING ART HISTORY

‘An Audacious and Radical Voice’

An exhibition explores the art of an ‘outsider’ whose work was almost lost to history.

An exhibition at the Memorial Art Gallery is bringing new attention to an unconventional artist whose talent as an “outsider” went largely unnoticed during her life as a Rochester seamstress.

The Surreal Visions of Josephine Tota, which will be exhibited through September 9, brings together more than 90 of Tota’s paintings, about 14 of which are drawn from the museum’s collection and the rest on loan from family and friends.

Condensing art-historical and popular culture sources—medieval illuminated manuscripts, early Renaissance panel paintings, the work of surrealist icons Frida Kahlo and Salvador Dalí, fairy tales, and children’s book illustrations—Tota created private images of startling immediacy and timelessness, says Jessica Marten, curator of American art at the museum.

Imbued with themes of metamorphosis, family bonds, physical pain, human frailty, the natural world, loss, and tragedy, Marten says the work represents the “audacious and radical voice” of an artist almost lost to history, one who challenges commonly held assumptions about female artists working outside the mainstream.

In the exhibition’s catalog, Marten writes, “Unusual paintings like these—near death-defying expressions of a little-known artist’s interior world, with incisive inquiries into womanhood, age, and power—rarely find their way inside an art museum’s walls.”



A seamstress and amateur artist who lived a conventional life among the Italian immigrant community in Rochester, Tota discovered the medium of egg tempera in her early 70s. Painting in the privacy of her home, she created a body of work that includes more than 90 small, jewel-like paintings.

In 1990, an exhibition in the Creative Workshop’s faculty and student exhibit space included more than 20 of her late paintings and a small group of ceramic figures and masks.

That was the only time that Tota’s late paintings were exhibited during her lifetime. The paintings were not available for sale and almost everything remained in the artist’s possession until her death in 1996.

In an essay about the exhibition, Janet Catherine Berlo, a professor of art and art history and of visual and cultural studies at Rochester, puts Tota in a line of artists that includes medieval painter and nun Hildegard of Bingen, Mexican surrealist Kahlo, and 20th-century “outsiders” Theora Hamblett and Charlotte Salomon.

Except for Kahlo, who came to the attention of the art world during her lifetime, Berlo writes, the work of the other women “could easily have been overlooked or lost—a fate surely encountered by other unsung women. . . . The serendipity of these histories makes us wonder how many other bodies of astonishing work by singular and remarkable women may have perished in the last

century.

“Such a thought should make us value even more highly those that have survived,” Berlo says.

After the premiere in Rochester, the Memorial Art Gallery plans to tour the exhibition nationally. **R**

—SCOTT HAUSER