

Vital timer: Work of art

Curator Nathan Harpaz is bringing his vision to life. Page 12

Vital timer

Work of art

Oakton College curator sculpts his ideal vision.

by Sue Masaracchia

Curator Nathan Harpaz has shaped Oakton Community College's William A. Koehnline Gallery into a laboratory of learning and showcase of culture.

During Harpaz's four years at Oakton, the school's art collections have taken more focus and have generated a greater interest from donors.

He developed the Sculpture Park on the Des Plaines campus and established a relationship with Pier Walk at Navy Pier—the largest juried exhibition of outdoor sculpture in the country. This agreement allows the campus to receive sculptures on long-term loan after being displayed at the Pier.

"Art is almost a mission of life, a commitment of life."

Nathan Harpaz

"Our collections have increased dramatically," says Harpaz, who is working to increase the number of sculptures on display on Oakton's Skokie campus, including featuring two permanent major exhibitions there. He also would like to see more space designated for permanent art collections as well as for graphics and prints.

Some prominent Chicago artists have approached the college, requesting showings at the gallery due to its blossoming reputation.

School of thought

The love of art comes naturally for Harpaz. His maternal grandfather was a designer, while his father was an engineer. A cousin on his father's side, who lives in Paris, was the first to publish a book about artists who perished in the Holocaust, Harpaz says.

A native of Israel, Harpaz became interested in art after high school. After earning a bachelor's degree in psychology and history, the accomplished oil painter served four years in the Israeli military.

As he pursued his master's degree in art history at Tel Aviv University, he abandoned creating his own art in favor of studying art theory, specializing in museum studies. Fascinated with psychology, especially Carl Jung and the concept of collective conscience, he wrote many papers combining art and psychology.

"At the university, I found it difficult to be a part-time artist," says Harpaz. "Art is almost a mission of life, a com-

mitment of life. I had to stop doing art. I needed to make some choices and chose art history. This way I was still in the field of fine art, but on a theoretical level now."

Harpaz also had developed a love of teaching. He served as a lecturer and curator of the Tel Aviv University gallery, where he created and taught a course in museum studies used to certify curators through a two-year program.

"It was a very extensive, successful program," Harpaz says. "The first year, many curators from a variety of museums attended in order to become certified." The course became a benchmark for the field and Harpaz became well-known in the museum arena in Israel.

Harpaz received his master's degree in 1979, and then became the curator of the Tel Aviv Memorial Art Museum, serving as its director from 1979 to 1987 and supervising a major renovation of the museum. He also was responsible for the research, "museological conception" and the master plan for the design of the Hertzliya Museum of Art, Israel, there during the mid-1980s.

Shock absorber

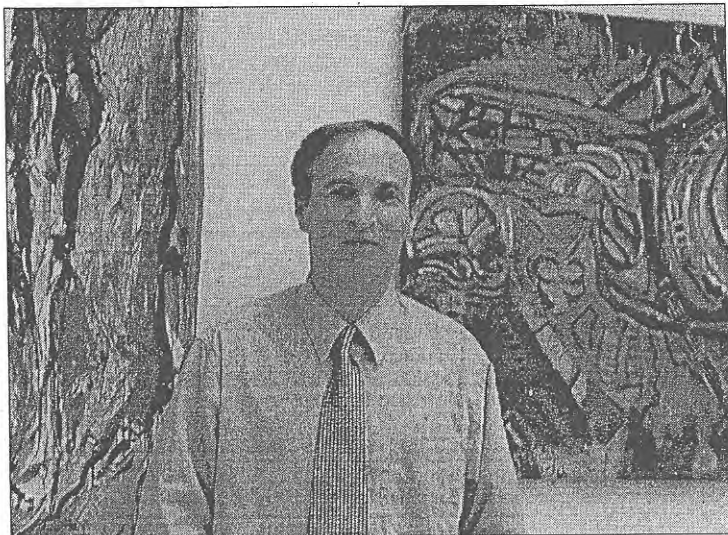
While a student, Harpaz met his wife, Miriam, a Chicago native and Loyola University student studying in Israel. They married in 1976 and lived abroad until 1987, when some personal events involving Miriam made it necessary for her to return to Chicago.

Despite the fact he had studied English as a second language since elementary school, "It was a difficult transition to come to America," Harpaz says. "It was a complete shock arriving there, especially since I was not aware of how the system worked and how to get a job."

Harpaz explains, "The museum field here is tough to break into, especially for someone with his background from another country. I sent tons of letters and resumes; it was a long-term search."

In the meantime, he worked as an art consultant and represented other artists as an art dealer, which means interfacing with galleries and museums, networking and developing computer skills. These abilities allowed Harpaz to develop a database of art collections and proved helpful once he arrived at Oakton.

But after several years of successful consulting, a "medical event" of his own in 1996 and "a minor surgery that got to be a large event" left Harpaz unable to do anything for six months. While recovering, he resumed his



search for full-time employment. Timing was on his side.

A newspaper ad heralded the need for a part-time curator at Oakton Community College. Despite the fact that the college's gallery was five years old, that position had never existed. The gallery had not been handled consistently, offering merely a core art collection from some donations and some purchases, Harpaz says.

Harpaz prepared himself well for the interview, creating a 200-page portfolio, which included visuals as a demonstration of what he could do. "I really connected with the dean [the late Richard Storinger]," Harpaz says.

"We talked on the same level and shared the same values. There was a lot of chemistry," he continues. "He gave me a chance and I didn't disappoint him."

Campus canvas

Within the first six months, Harpaz convinced the administration that the position should become a full-time one. He also established the Koehnline Gallery advisory board, comprised of faculty members, mostly from the art department, and some administrators. Under the direction of Harpaz, the board selects exhibitions and approves programs.

The decision of which works to display includes "considering how a piece will fit on a certain site on campus," Harpaz says. For example, there is a child-like community totem by sculptor Peter Michel near the childcare wing and Jim Gallucci's "Oracle"—a gate leading to nowhere—is on the open lawn, suggesting the openness to education and opportunity. The latter frequently serves as a second logo for the college.

"The gallery serves the community with informal education, offering people from the community an opportunity to come here to participate in different activities, including special events and experiencing visiting collections," says Harpaz, who likes to focus on Chicago-area and Illinois artists.

This year, Harpaz is teaching two courses he created, one in art history

and an introduction to museum studies.

"We allow students to get closer to the visual arts programs here, using the gallery to analyze exhibitions and do research," Harpaz says. "For the art history course, students can use our collections as materials for assignments and can relate the course materials to works available here rather than, on slide reproductions in books. We have the real thing."

Home front

It took him 10 years to return to the museum field, but Harpaz now has the best of all his worlds—his family, courses to teach and a position that allows him to shape the future of a gallery.

Daughter Ally is graduating from the University of Kansas this year with a degree in early childhood education, while his other daughter, Sharon, is a sophomore at Southern Illinois University, studying psychology and taking some art courses.

Wife Miriam completed her degree in social work from Loyola and is completing a master's degree in addictions studies and social work while working for the Illinois Department of Human Services.

Although he has not painted for years, Harpaz has thought about reviving that interest. He also enjoys reading, gardening and watching basketball games.

Harpaz's goal is to see a gallery like Koehnline at the Hartstein campus of Oakton in Skokie, though the Skokie campus currently lacks space for consistent programs. For now, he would like to see room for temporary exhibitions carved out and to see more space designated for permanent art collections, especially graphics and prints.

He also would like to continue developing the gallery at the Des Plaines campus. "I like the organization I am working for and enjoy supporting the system and all the activities we offer students," Harpaz says. "We are successful because it is a collective effort."