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## Art therapy at the museum of tolerance: responses to the life and work of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis

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### Introduction

I have been an art therapist and an art therapy educator for over 20 years and have always focused my endeavors in clinical and educational settings. I have worked diligently to centralize the visual arts in the delivery of mental health services and in the training of psychotherapists. The museum world, although an area of interest, had not been connected to my professional explorations. The extraordinary exhibit *Friedl Dicker-Brandeis And The Children Of Terezin: An Exhibition Of Art And Hope*, recently installed at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, California, offered me an opportunity to extend these self-imposed boundaries. Invited to utilize my clinical and educational skills to augment the museum's outreach, I participated in an endeavor that reaffirmed my belief in the expressive vibrancy of the art therapy modality in nonclinical settings. This article outlines the ways in which the theory and practice of art therapy inform an expanded experience of museum viewing that transitions the participant from passive viewer to self-expressive artist and potential exhibitor. It is a story of transformations, both my own and the museum attendees who participated in the endeavors.

### Friedl Dicker-Brandeis

Friedl Dicker-Brandeis was a Jewish artist, intellectual, and political activist in Vienna before the Second World War. A prolific painter who was an early member of the Bauhaus movement, she painted alongside Klee and Kandinsky and expressed herself in many artistic forms including costume and set design for Berthold Brecht, furniture making, and political posters. About her creative process she wrote, "My life in art has redeemed me from a

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thousand deaths. Through my painting, which I have practiced diligently, I have atoned for a guilt I do not know the origin of” (Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, 1938, in Makarova, 2001, p. 9).

As Hitler expanded his regime through Eastern Europe, closing the Bauhaus and limiting opportunities for Jews, Friedl and her colleagues were forced to make difficult choices. Friedl relocated to Czechoslovakia where life, at least through the 1930s, was easier. Although Friedl had opportunities to escape Nazi dominated Europe, in the summer of 1938 she moved to the Czech countryside where she remained with her husband as the anti-Jewish laws became increasingly restrictive and humiliating. In 1942 Friedl was sent by transport to Terezin where she was given the number “548”. While a camp inmate, Friedl devoted herself to teaching children art. Using smuggled paper and art supplies, and contrary to the Nazi edict forbidding education, Friedl helped the children of Terezin express their fear, their defiance, and their hope for survival. Before her final deportation to Auschwitz, Friedl hid 5000 children’s drawings and poems in two suitcases. They were taken out of the camp by a close friend and only discovered 10 years later (Makarova, 2001, p. 29).

One of Friedl’s young students, Edna Amit, described the impact Dicker-Brandeis had through the art processes she taught, “Everybody put us in boxes-she took us out of them” (Makarova, 2001, p. 199).

Friedl Dicker-Brandeis was transferred to Auschwitz, her final destination, in 1944.

### **The exhibit**

*Friedl Dicker-Brandeis And The Children Of Terezin: An Exhibition Of Art And Hope* was the culmination of a long journey undertaken by Regina Miller and Elena Makarova to locate and curate the extant art of Dicker-Brandeis in combination with the children’s art from the concentration camp. The exhibition opened in Vienna, Austria in 1999 at the Palais Harrach Museum and toured through Europe and Japan before moving to the United States in 2002. On November 12, 2002, it was installed at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, the educational arm of the Simon Weisenthal Center, an international Jewish human rights organization. It remains there until relocating to The Jewish Museum of New York in September 2004. The exhibition draws on the impressive lifetime body of Dicker-Brandeis’ work, along with artwork by her students, the children imprisoned with her at the Terezin concentration camp from 1942 to 1944. Over 60 paintings by the children of Terezin, as well as approximately 165 works by Friedl including watercolors, oil, charcoals, textiles, theater designs, furniture, and children’s toys are displayed in the exhibit.

### **Connections between LMU and the museum of tolerance**

I had never heard of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis when Regina Miller, the Museum of Tolerance’s Director of Special Exhibits, called me about a special reception for the exhibit at which Edith Kramer, a pioneer in art therapy in America, would be speaking. The connections between my art therapy world, my interest in museums, and indeed my own Jewish identity, were being forged. The students, faculty, and alumnae of the Graduate Department of Marital and Family Therapy at Loyola Marymount University (where I am the

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