

Featured Artist: LYANNE MALAMED

By Dr. Lynn L. Siebert



Apple Gatherers

(oil, acrylic, gold leaf, paper on linen)

Radiance, mystery, and a sense of the divine emanate from medieval and early Renaissance European religious paintings which blended humanity's frailties with flat, often distorted perspectives and the lavishly gilded backgrounds used to depict the heavenly realms. No stranger to these traditions, Lyanne Malamed revisits the gilded, ceremonial splendors of Byzantium but does so with a unique, modern sensibility. Utterly distinctive, Malamed's art uses a rich language of symbols and historical techniques to portray the wisdom, isolation, dignity and value of women, especially those with age and experience.



Contiguous I

(oil on linen)



The Elders

(oil, acrylic, clay, sand, 23K gold leaf on linen)

Growing up in the small town of Alton, Iowa, Malamed graduated from Briar Cliff College in Sioux City, Iowa, and took graduate courses in art at the University of Iowa. A professional artist since 1956, she has focussed on "uncharted territory," centering her works on portrayals of older women. Deeply affected by the isolation and loneliness she sensed among older women, Malamed states, "I hope to call attention to the fact that these women are frequently alone and that they should not be ignored. They are valuable assets to our community." With eloquence, skill and sensitivity, she portrays older women as teachers and nurturers, as dignified elders rich in wisdom.



Alone

(oil on linen)

Coming to the canvas from an art history background, Malamed shows a deep affinity for and appreciation of centuries-old artistic traditions, abundantly evidenced in her paintings. Her figures are clad in ceremonial robes, in layered Renaissance hats and dignified drapery. They process or stand in frieze-like poses, holding banners, flags or birds and often wearing or carrying masks. The message is at once modern and ancient, evoking the centuries old traditions of Venetian Carnevals, ancient sculptured friezes or the golden mosaic processions of Byzantine Ravenna while simultaneously evoking the modern invisibility of older women in a society ambivalent, indifferent or even hostile towards its female elders.



Five Masked Women with Pomegranate

(oil, 23K gold leaf on linen)

Mysterious and solemn, Malamed's women challenge and confront you with their frank, unpitying stares...with their *gravitas*, with their dignified yet isolated presence. Their faces are experienced, lined, full of knowledge yet fearful, needing masks to play different roles or to hide their vulnerabilities, to disguise their inmost thoughts and to protect their dignity. They don't seek pity but rather demand acknowledgement, awareness and acceptance. Malamed does not paint her faces from models nor photos, but rather from memory and imagination. Thus, through the more generalized nature of her portraiture, the artist creates figures imbued with universality, with a quality of "Everywoman" whose experiences and thoughts mirror those of all women.



Woman
(oil on linen)



Elders with Birds
(oil, gold leaf on linen)

Drawn from historic tradition, her richly symbolic language also distinguishes Malamed's work from that of other modern painters. Inspired by such Netherlandish paintings as Hieronymus Bosch's "Garden of Earthly Delights" (c. 1500), among others, Malamed shares a fascination with varied artistic symbols of the 15th and 16th centuries. At that time, birds, most notably ravens, not only symbolized "non-believers" and "magicians" but also signified wisdom. They reflect forgotten domestic activities (such as catching birds for food) – which Malamed depicts with older women passing down the skill to subsequent generations. Birds also portray "winged souls," as well as wisdom, hope while eggs, not surprisingly, imply rebirth.



Bird Catchers II
(oil, acrylic, paper, 23K gold leaf on linen)



Magic with five Birds with Five Women
(oil on linen)

A related symbol is the thread or string, often shown tied to birds. Ingeniously, the winding curlicues of thread in *Young Girl with Flying Bird* provide a perfect means of visualizing the soaring flight of the bird. At the same time, string can be associated with the "thread of life" – that mythical skein woven by women or by mythological forces (The Fates, or, as in Wagner's operas, The Norns). The thread can be associated with the path to freedom (as in Greek myth where a god uses thread to find his way back out of a maze) or, conversely, can depict the restriction of flight or freedom. As art critic Rachel Mullin explained, many older women, in particular, share the experience of these birds tied to strings; they are "unwilling captives," "imprisoned by their circumstances."



Young Girl with Flying Bird

(oil on linen)

Particularly prominent in Malamed's works, masks reflect her ties to multiple levels of artistic history. Art historian Dr. Diane Fischer comments that, as in Greek antiquity, masks in Malamed's paintings reflect discrete emotional states. They also tie into the Renaissance and later European traditions of lavish masked balls and celebrations such as Venice's pre-Lenten Carnevale, where one could transform one's identity by wearing intricate costumes and masks. . In some cases, Malamed's figures wear multiple masks, colored faces or even hoods with masks. Or they might gaze into a mirror seeing a different face – in a sense depicting a quasi-mask and thus, multiple layers of identity to which the modern-day woman can easily relate. The age-old question pertains: Who am I? Wife? Mother? Girl? Woman? Daughter? Sister? Grandmother? Spinster? Divorcee? Widow? All or none of the above? Am I happy? Sad? Treasured? Neglected? Do we take off one mask only to put on another? The artist herself explains, "the faces that are presented to the world are not always real 'faces,' but rather masks that are meant to hide panic, terror and fear from the rest of society and thus protect the dignity that is retained by these individuals."



Masked Rites

(oil, acrylic, clay, sand, 23K gold leaf on linen)



Separate Faces

(oil, acrylic, clay, 23K gold leaf on linen)

Other symbols include trees and branches, signifying hope, regeneration and the connections through generations. Brides and horses refer to life cycles and to passage into the first phase of adult womanhood while crystals, often carried by the women, represent divine light. It is through the pervasive and conscious use of these traditional symbols that Malamed's works achieve their striking, mythical quality while engaging their viewers' minds.

As with much medieval art, the composition of many Malamed paintings emphasizes the hieratic and decorative over naturalism, with ritual gestures, formalized and stylized positions, distorted perspective and flat background. What stuns the viewer, however, is this artist's use of color and texture. Her canvasses literally glow with an inner light. By painstakingly applying real gold leaf to her paintings, along with richly pigmented reds and blues (again a Northern Renaissance influence), and a mix of sand and clay onto the painted surfaces, Malamed achieves a truly breathtaking result. The canvasses are subtly rich, never gaudy. Vibrant and strikingly unique, they mix modernist *Angst* with the fairytale world of medieval iconography. As if enchanted, the paintings glow, and the faces thereon, lined with the accumulated wisdom of the years, promise knowledge and insight.



Speaking with Birds

(oil, 23K gold leaf on linen)

Malamed's drawings provide a different type of experience, exploring the chiaroscuro techniques of the Dutch masters tradition. Utilizing the simplest of media (black conte, paintstick or charcoal on paper), she creates portraits of dramatic power. An elderly woman sits alone on a chair as if about to be engulfed by darkness and loneliness. One woman's face is the sole source of light in an otherwise black environment. A crowd of faces cry out against annihilation as X's obliterate some faces while in yet another drawing the center figure of three, mostly in shadow, radiates inner peace through the halo of braids wrapping her head. Kindness and peace radiate from another's visage – drawn lightly on newspaper, while in another work, a woman in a black hat looks into the distance with a palpable sense of concern. From these spare works, Malamed demonstrates her virtuosity at psychological portrayal. The viewer cannot help being touched and deeply moved by these works which reveal Malamed's penetrating insights into the human condition, accomplished without her paintings' sensuous luxuriance of gold leaf, brilliant colors and rich symbolism.



Old Woman in a chair
(Charcoal on museum board, 1981)



Woman in a Hat
(Brown conte on paper, 1983)



Fragments of Frieze Entablature No. 2 and No. 3
(paintstick on paper, 1984)



Crowd I, II (Diptych)
(Paintstick on paper, 1990)

Regardless of the medium, Malamed enralls the viewer. Her works are majestic and powerful visions which speak with authority to the universality of life's experiences. In her drawings, Malamed heightens powerful emotions by removing the distractions of color, texture and symbolism. At the same time, her paintings are so visually lavish, they leave the viewer mesmerized, breathless and haunted by their mystery and majesty.

Lyanne Malamed has charted new territory with her works, painting and drawing the world of older women with intensity and insight and, simultaneously, infusing them with her own eloquent, original and magical blend of the ancient and the modern.



Bird Catchers

(oil, acrylic, gold leaf on linen)

A recipient of numerous grants and prizes (including a fellowship from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts), Lyanne Malamed has exhibited her works in multiple one-woman and group shows throughout New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Additionally, her work is included many private and corporate permanent collections. She currently resides in Bridgewater, NJ.

Special thanks to the sources for this profile:

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<http://www.pacpubserver.com/new/enter/8-3-00/lyanne.html> - website of the Packet Online (The Princeton Packet), featuring Susan Van Dongen's article, "The elders: Art, aging and alienation: The paintings of Lyanne Malamed," Aug. 3, 2000. (several jpegs included).

<http://www.pringlegallery.com> - website of the Pringle Gallery, Philadelphia, PA which includes commentary and jpegs of many of Lyanne Malamed's paintings.