

# One More Bud

*Objects such as a family's table, chairs and beloved artwork are tangible blessings, writes one self-described pack rat, memories that can be stared at, held—and then let go.*

By **Elin Schoen Brockman**

My father's name was Irwin Donald Schoen. Hardly anyone knew that, however. He went by "Bud" or "I.D."—which worked well since interior design was not merely how he earned a living; it was his calling. Back in the days when midcentury Modern was simply modern, his furniture store was the first to bring the likes of Charles and Ray Eames, Isamu Noguchi, Russel Wright and George Nelson to Allentown, Pennsylvania. Today, the family joke (or the joke on our family) is that if we still had the stuff he was selling back then we would be gazillionaires. "But who knew?" as someone always says. My father probably did, but for a material guy, he let a lot of things slip through his fingers.

THERE WAS THE GEORGE NAKASHIMA table, which he used to pay a legal fee. There were the iconic Eames chairs that didn't do anything for the kitchen décor. So he had them painted red. Then green, to match yet another setting. Then he sold them for nothing, which is what they were worth by then, anyway.

As a born pack rat, I never could fathom my father's cavalier attitude toward things. I always believed passionately in the ability of objects to embody moments—even whole chapters—of my past, to conjure up lost worlds and people. I live surrounded by things, by memories I can stare at and hold—and which require a lot of dusting. I think of them as tangible blessings. My father thought of them as clutter. Or even as extremely bad taste, although he had the good taste never to put it that way. "Less is more!" he'd bark. "Less is more!"

Some objects, though, presided over every place he lived until the day he died.

Five Israeli paintings, to be exact: two Joseph Zaritskys, two Yochanan Simons and a Moshe Mokady that he and my mother bought during their first trip to Israel in 1960.



It is astonishing to think that as young as they were then, both in their thirties, Israel was younger. The views of Jerusalem from Mount Zion among my father's kodachrome stereo slides are practically biblical in their starkness. Masada had yet to be excavated. *Exodus* was being filmed—that's how long ago this was! (For years my dad dined out on the story of how every night at dinner my mother made sure she was seated where she could have an uninterrupted view of Paul Newman, who was staying at the same hotel.)

But already there was a distinctly Israeli style in place. Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem had fused East European traditions with those of the Middle East to create a homegrown aesthetic. Tel Aviv's Maskit—The Israeli Center for Handicrafts struck my parents as Mari-

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mekko with a Yemenite accent. And Hadassah Klachkin showcased the pioneering painters of what came to be known as the New Horizons school at her eponymous gallery on Gordon Street, also in Tel Aviv. My parents fell in love with those artists.

**A**FTER MY FATHER'S DEATH IN 2006, A FAMILY DECISION was made to sell two of the paintings, a Zaritsky and a Simon, both kibbutz scenes. Left to my own devices, I wouldn't have parted with any of them. For me, the paintings contained not only Israel's childhood but my own. My mother had died in 1979. Now my father was gone. Looking at the paintings brought them back, along with the redwood and glass house I grew up in. The paintings were my last link to all of that. No one else in the family felt the same way, and, in the end, the decision was not mine alone to make.

But once it had been made, once I had received that thrilling call from Sotheby's inviting us to sell our "beautiful, beautiful" paintings in their 2007 Israeli and International Art auction, I got caught up in becoming a player on the global art scene, however small a player and for however brief a time.

Our paintings had, in the four decades since my parents fell for their gorgeous colors, cutting-edge Modernism and sheer Israeliness, taken on historical importance. Over the years, my father had had them appraised. None of the appraisals approached what Sotheby's expected they would now bring in. And they would appear in the official catalog of the sale. And the week before the sale they would be on exhibit at Sotheby's. Right up there with major paintings by Reuven Rubin, Avigdor Arikha and Mordecai Ardon (as well as other Zaritskys and Simons) and photographs by Adi Nes, whose *Last Supper* had set a record in this same sale the previous year. My father would have been so proud. His paintings had made it—big time.


Still, I had misgivings. Lighting a *yortzeit* candle for my father two weeks before the auction, I deeply felt his spirit within me; it did not reside, I told myself, within any objects you could hang on a wall.

But those paintings were not just any objects. They were truly tangible blessings. I reminded myself of the Nakashima table and all the other things my father had sold, repainted, reconfigured or given away. I could almost hear him saying, "For heaven's sake, move on." But I didn't want to listen.

Two days before the auction, there was a brunch for sellers at Sotheby's. I would get to see our paintings on display and say good-bye to them in person. But that morning a blizzard swept the Northeast. Not a good day to take the train into the city, let alone drive. I would go in the next

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## After my father's death in 2006, a family decision was made to sell two of his paintings—a Zaritsky and a Simon, both of them kibbutz scenes.

day, the last day of the exhibition; it would end at 1 P.M., so I would have to leave early.

At 6:30 A.M. I lay in bed, practically shaking with ambivalence. To go or not to go? My misery was such that I began imagining the paintings taking on lives of their own, wondering where I was, lamenting that I had abandoned them, hanging there on the gallery walls among other masterpieces cast off by their owners, awaiting who knew what future.

**W**ITH THESE THOUGHTS SWIRLING AROUND IN MY head, I fell asleep again, awakening two hours later. It was now too late—really too late.

“I feel so guilty,” I said to my husband.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“But it’s like I have abandoned them...”

old son, Jonathan, who had never shown great interest in his grandfather’s or anyone else’s art collection, accompanied me to Sotheby’s. Within seconds after Jennifer Roth, the dynamic auctioneer, started the bids rolling, Jonathan was riveted.

As images of the pictures flashed by, about a dozen Sotheby’s staffers countered the floor bids with phone bids from all over the world. At one point, Jonathan whispered to me, “I think I’m going to start collecting art.” He gripped my hand as our paintings appeared. Then disappeared. We high-fived, celebrating how well they did. It was over.

To my surprise, I had only one regret. With my father’s passion for good art, good design and high drama, he would have enjoyed this day more than anyone. If only he could have been here. But then, looking at his grandson’s excited face, I realized that he was. **H**

“They don’t belong to you anymore.”

He was right. They were gone the minute I signed the contract with Sotheby’s. They have moved on. Why couldn’t I?

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