

ARTS IN AMERICA

Susan Kleinman

Blending Modern Art With Objects of the Spirit

LA JOLLA, Calif. — Tobi Kahn is unabashedly exuberant about all of his work: his paintings, which have been likened to those of Arthur Dove and Mark Rothko; his sculptures, which stand in major museums and public gardens; and his stage sets for the playwright Elizabeth Swados. But no project touches him quite as personally as his Judaica, on view at the Lawrence Family Jewish Community Center here until June 15.

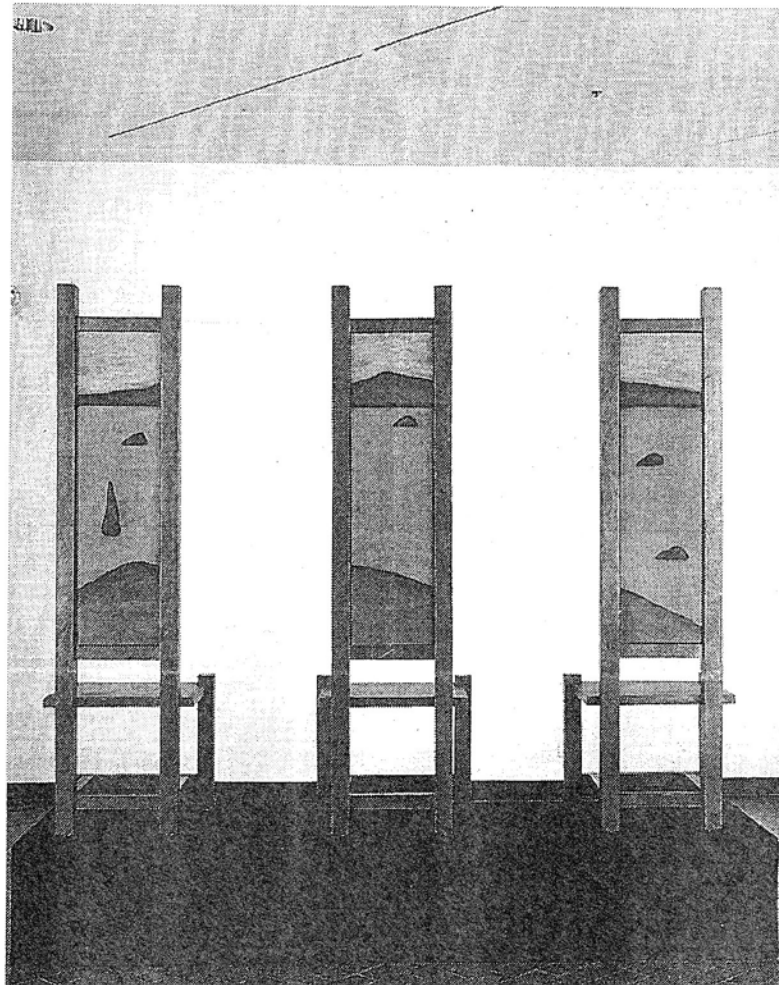
For a long time, Mr. Kahn, who is based in New York, resisted showing the ceremonial objects, which he made for his family. The artist, whose reputation has grown steadily since the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum included him in its 1985 show "New Horizons in American Art," was afraid of detracting from the broader message of his other work.

In 1994, Laura Kruger, curator of the Hebrew Union College Galleries in New York, offered to exhibit Mr. Kahn's ritual art. He declined, but half-jokingly countered with a deal: If he had an important one-man show before his 50th birthday, he would exhibit his Judaica.

Two years later, Art in America included his "Metamorphoses" in its national museum preview list. The art historian Peter Selz was the curator. Ms. Kruger saw the listing, picked up the telephone and dialed Mr. Kahn. Her persistence paid off. "Metamorphoses," which traveled to eight museums in three years and featured catalogue essays by Mr. Selz, Dore Ashton and Michael Brenson, gave Mr. Kahn the confidence and credibility to blur the lines between spiritual and secular, between fine art and decorative objects, in his work.

"I've always been committed to the notion that modern art and ancient ritual can enhance, rather than exclude each other," said Mr. Kahn, 47, who studied Talmud in Jerusalem as a young man and recently received the 2000 Alumni Achievement Award from Pratt Institute, where he earned his master's degree in fine arts. Many of his paintings are rich in Jewish symbolism, and his ritual objects are strongly influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright and the Scottish architect and designer Charles Renie Mackintosh.

Ms. Kruger selected 58 of Mr. Kahn's ceremonial objects for "Avodah: Objects of the Spirit," which had a preview at Hebrew Union College in New York last year and opened on April 2 at the Jewish Com-



Nicholas Walster

Chairs created by Tobi Kahn to welcome daughters into the family.

munity Center's Gottlieb Gallery in La Jolla. The exhibition is to travel to two dozen museums over the next five years.

For each group of objects, the painter's wife, Nessa Rapoport, a writer, composed an original prayer. Like much of her work, the meditations are elliptical but not inaccessible. While they echo the rhythms of the Hebrew Bible, they resonate for readers of all faiths.

"Avodah" has two meanings in Hebrew, work and worship, and the show is highly particular as well as personal. It includes the huppa under which Mr. Kahn and Ms. Rapoport were married in 1986 and the chair the artist created for their son's circumcision ceremony. For their daughters' Shalom Bat, or baby-naming celebrations, Mr. Kahn built and painted landscapes on three additional chairs, in which his wife,

mother and mother-in-law welcomed the next generation of female children into the family.

As his children have grown, Mr. Kahn makes ceremonial objects to keep up with their progress. "Avodah" includes spice boxes small enough to fit into child-size hands when the family ushers out the Sabbath with sweet fragrances, and alms boxes to teach them the importance of charity. Most of his more recent pieces, which are cast in bronze or made of wood and then painted, have tripod bases or triple images, an allusion to the Talmudic assertion that the world stands on three pillars: Torah, avodah and acts of loving kindness.

Many of Mr. Kahn's ritual objects reflect a well-developed sense of play. On his seder plate, for example, Passover foods are held aloft by Egyptian-inspired pedestals. "I love

it. The Egyptians enslaved us, now they're holding up the matzos for our seder," Mr. Kahn said.

When "Avodah" had its preview in New York last year, Ms. Kruger, struck by the response to the exhibition, began looking for ways to extend the show's life and expand the project's scope. Around the same time, Carol Brenglass Spinner visited the Jewish Museum's summer arts program and watched Mr. Kahn teach a group of high school students how to look at and create ritual objects.

"I see dozens of educational programs every year," said Ms. Spinner, a board member of the National Foundation for Jewish Culture, "but this was the first time I saw even a glimmer of a project that could really reach this important age group." She approached Mr. Kahn about the idea of a nationwide arts and education program that would use his ceremonial objects as a springboard for fostering creativity and a sense of cultural identification in young adults.

Under Ms. Spinner's direction, "Avodah" has become a multimedia project involving prominent figures in Jewish culture, the arts and interfaith dialogue.

Emily Bilski, whose catalogue for the Jewish Museum's "Berlin Metropolitan: Jews and the New Culture, 1890-1918" show recently won the National Jewish Book Award, is writing a book about "Avodah," and Daniel Gold is creating a short film that will be part of the exhibition, as well as a feature-length documentary. The project team, which includes the Jewish Museum's former director of education, Judith Siegel, is also creating a teacher-training manual, a CD-ROM and a pop-up book of ceremonial objects for children.

On April 30, the Rev. Terrence Dempsey, founding director of the Museum of Contemporary Religious Art in St. Louis, will moderate a panel discussion here on "Embodying the Spirit: Art and Soul in a New Era." Exhibition organizers hope that many such intercultural programs will emerge from "Avodah" as it travels.

"My fantasy," said Mr. Kahn, "is for everyone of every religion who sees this show to make their own ceremonial object, and to find ways to make ritual more personal, to relate it to their own experience."