

WRITTEN
BY
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historical masters



Maxwell
Chazyat

1909-1982

Almost any artist will tell you this, regardless of their preferred medium. However, they all seem to have something that they can turn to as a way to relight the fire that inspires them to create, and for Maxwell Chayat his inspiration was his religion. As a practicing member of Judaica, Chayat would incorporate his love of the Hebrew language and the light of Torah in all his works, whether it was a piece of jewelry or a sculpture.

His creations perfectly blend the "Mad Men" style that was popular at the time with hints of his religious background, all while showcasing his signature flame motif.

Maxwell Chayat was born to a Jewish family in Paris, France, in 1909. Not much of his family is known and the details about

the first half of his life are quite fuzzy. However, what is known for sure is that sometime after World War I broke out across Europe in 1914, Chayat and his family had decided to emigrate from France to take advantage of the new opportunities that so many found in the United States. At some point during his

Inspiration
is a fickle beast.



teenage years, Chayat began his jewelry apprenticeship and managed to stick to it throughout his time at Columbia University, where he received his Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Fine Arts. After his graduation, Chayat found himself teaching art in New York City until World War II broke out on September 1st, 1939. Chayat would join the sixteen million other Americans who would serve in the military during the two years that the United States was in the war. He ended up serving as a Marine Corps Air Intelligence Officer and would be stationed in the Pacific. Upon his return at the end of the war, Chayat resumed teaching, only instead of heading back to New York, he would head out west to take the position as head of the art department at New Mexico State Teacher College.

It was during his time in New Mexico that Chayat would start growing into himself as a jeweler. It was in 1948 that a new element would appear in his jewelry. Before heading out to New Mexico, Chayat mostly worked with silver, copper, and aluminum, and was known for creating visual plane changes by using the technique of wire applique. This was a way of creating a three-dimensional form by



using volume but without the weight. This could be done by expanding a piece of wire past the bezel and folding it back onto itself to create a ribbon in space. So many of his works include some kind of ribbon effect that seems to wrap around the main piece; some of his finest examples include his sterling cuff bracelet. Once he arrived in the Land of Enchantment he began using different stones in his works, and this probably had to do with the fact that he was once quoted saying, "one had only to reach down on the ground and pick up anything from agate to turquoise." With a bounty so plentiful it seemed silly not to use it. Pieces of quartz, tiger's eye, and while less common, even enamel, would also find their way into his works.



One of his more noteworthy pieces that was created during this time features a piece of polished rose quartz left in a fairly organic shape. Chayat showcased it by surrounding the stone with a sterling silver wire that almost seems as if they are rotating around the piece of rose quartz much like Saturn's rings. This piece also contains Chayat's famous flame

modern masters *continued*

motif. The clasp of the necklace is a toggle in which the bar has been replaced with a flame-like hook to slide through the hoop. If he was not able to work the flame motif into his work, Chayat still attempted to at least keep the flowing effect. In a ring made of moonstone, blue topaz, sterling silver, and a stunning oval star sapphire, Chayat created an "organic, midcentury swirl design, almost like little moons circling the larger star sapphire."

After retiring from New Mexico State Teacher College, Chayat moved to Springfield, New Jersey, with his wife Sylvia, and three children, Jonathan, Juliet, and their eldest daughter Sherry. It was during this time that he met Rabbi Ruben R. Levine of Temple Beth



Ah'm who influenced Chayat to focus even more on his passion for creating Jewish ceremonial art. The objects that Chayat would create included things such as Torah breastplates, Torah pointers, mezuzah, kiddush cups, brides' prayer book covers, eternal lights, and yahrzeit cups. What he would do to truly honor these pieces was to spend up to weeks studying under Rabbi Levine to learn the history, usage, and their importance to Judaism. This attention to detail and amount of study would eventually lead to his sculptures being sought after by several museums including the Smithsonian, the Jewish Museum of New York, and the Newark Museum. His sculptures would be added as fixtures to several universities, such as Cooper Union and Crouse College of Fine Arts, which is on the Syracuse University campus.

Maxwell Chayat passed away on July 29, 1982, in Englewood, New Jersey. He was a proud and well-studied Jewish man who was not only interested in his religion but celebrated it. His jewelry is still highly collectible to this day, most likely because of its vintage 1940s-1950s style, while his sculptures still stand today.

