

The art of Anna Ruth Henriques



Anna Ruth Henriques probably encapsulates better than anyone the nature of Jamaican Jewish identity. Her father is from a Jewish family that goes back to 15th century Spain. Her mother represents two other strands of Jamaican ethnicity – Afro-Caribbean and Asian.

Her achievement is to have used all aspects of her background in artworks that have intense Jewish content but have also been acclaimed as having much to say about Jamaican identity as a whole. In the words of the Canadian academic, Diana Cooper-Clark (*Calabash Journal of Caribbean Arts and Letters*, Vol 4, No 1), she expresses “the dynamism of displacement and fluidity, found in the many nations, races, sexual orientations and cultures, that constitutes Caribbean identity... Unlike many North Americans and Europeans who narrate Caribbean identity primarily in terms of the African legacy, Henriques foregrounds aboriginal Tainos, Sephardic Jews, and gay men, groups largely invisible in contemporary thought and art”.

Her most celebrated work is *The Book of Mechtilde*, a lavishly illuminated manuscript based on *The Book of Job*. Mechtilde is Henriques’ mother, Sheila Mechtilde Henriques, who who died when Anna was 11. She, like, Job, lived a virtuous life but was afflicted by suffering and loss. In the book, the historical journey of Jamaica, the Land of Jah (the Rastafarian God) is intertwined with Mechtilde’s cancer-ridden body. “It addresses issues of undeserved human suffering and the apparent silence of God on the one hand, and the restoration of freedom, spontaneity and loyalty on the other. These concerns are seminal to the history of Jamaica, Mechtilde, and the Book of Job that is Israel’s history

up to the Exile.” (Diana Cooper-Clark)

Her work most directly related to Jewish experience in Jamaica is *The Exodus Series* of giclée prints. Henriques writes:

“In 1992, I travelled to Seville, Spain as Design Coordinator of the Jamaica Pavilion at the Universal Exposition. The Exposition was planned to coincide with the 500-year celebrations of Columbus’ departure to the New World. His voyages commenced the year of the Spanish Inquisition, precipitating the expulsion of Jews from Spain. As Columbus set sail from this city that once was home to thousands of Jews, he took with him numerous Jewish young men at the bequest of their families to ensure them safe passage from Spain, my father’s ancestors amongst them.

While in Spain, I wandered through the Jewish quarter, poured over maps of Columbus’ voyages, read the endless articles that addressed the events of half a millennium ago, and became imbued with the lingering legacy of my paternal ancestry. A new work was brewing. Columbus had set sail in search of new territory and gold, but instead returned with spices, specifically cocoa. Coincidentally, I had taken along with me a dozen Jamaican chocolate bars as sustenance during what was originally meant to be a couple weeks in Seville but what ended up as four months.

I saved the gold wrappers of those chocolate bars. In Spain, I also accumulated a few coins, and a Portuguese tourist brochure. A large branch of my family had fled to Portugal which at least for a short while, had wooed the Jews because of their wealth. I arranged my collections on canvas boards in iconographic forms. As the pieces came together, thus began my memorials to an Old World which had been lost, at the same time a celebration of a New World won.

The Exodus Series comprises 12 works each an ode to one of the 12 scattered tribes, each a visual epitaph to this second Exodus and the impact it had on a people.”

Diana Cooper Clark ends her *Calabash* article: “The act of creation in Henriques’ art work is a Jewish *matzeva*, an invisible tombstone, erected to those whose voices have been silenced by a history of domination. Her art speaks for those who cannot”.

The Book of Mechtilde is in the collection of The Jewish Museum in the City of New York and also available in a facsimile edition (published by Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).

Above: *Book of Mechtilde 27*

A blue teardrop hangs suspended in front of a *shofar* and embedded within it is the Tree of Life epitomising fertility and eternal life (Genesis 3:9, 22, 24). The *shofar* is like a Sephardic chant and sound that weeps for Mechtilde and the land of Jah but there is always the expectation of immortality and rebirth. Around are words from the *Book of Job*, and beyond, the flowers and fauna of Jamaica

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The Exodus Series: Crest

The names of early settlers surround a Spanish wrought-iron gate. At the top of the central square is a Spanish coin, then ancient texts, a Spanish-Portuguese family crest and beneath that a photograph of the Shaare Shalom Synagogue.