

# Artist Marilyn Lande



Marilyn Lande

BY CORINNE J. BROWN

AMONG OURSELVES

New members to the Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies often come into our midst without introduction or follow-up. (Hopefully, future member profiles in our journal will close that gap.) The recent enrollment of Denver artist and community leader Marilyn Lande provides an opportunity to highlight a remarkable artist whose fascination with Jewish—and especially Sephardic—history, offers a body of work worth noting.

**Corinne Brown:** *What drew you to Sephardic Jewish history? Are you a descendant?*

**Marilyn Lande:** When I was in third grade I had only one hour of Jewish studies... my father intended to enroll me in a synagogue. I had the opportunity to sit in on a Jewish history class and although this was my only Jewish studies

experience as a child, the book with the map of Canaan remains vivid in my mind today. Interest in Jewish studies was enhanced when I met my future brother-in-law Michael, a survivor of Auschwitz, originally from Czechoslovakia. His story of survival, having been taken as child of 12, left me awe-struck and full of questions.

As a student at Northwestern University, I majored in history emphasizing Jewish topics when I could. I studied and created presentations on the culture, art and Jewish history when we helped create the first Denver Reconstructionist *Havurah*. When we traveled, and I first discovered the *Alhambra* and *Granada*, I was awakened to the romance of our history; to all the possibilities.



**CB:** What is your training as an artist? Photographer?

**ML:** Growing up, I attended the Chicago Art Institute almost weekly. Later on, I took painting classes at the University of Denver. Photography was self-taught and inspired the videos I created of Jewish women and their stories for Denver Community Television. A collection of my videos taken over 10 years can be found in the Penrose special collections and is called the Marilyn Lande Jewish Women's Archives. I developed a photography technique that combined video and 35 mm photography which led to an invitation to exhibit in Pueblo, Colorado (through CSU).

I smile when I look back and "see" my first "sculpture" I made as a girl—a first baseman's baseball glove that actually worked. My father displayed it prominently in the office window of his three-pump gas station in Chicago.

**CB:** When did you begin the visual records of your travels to Iberia?

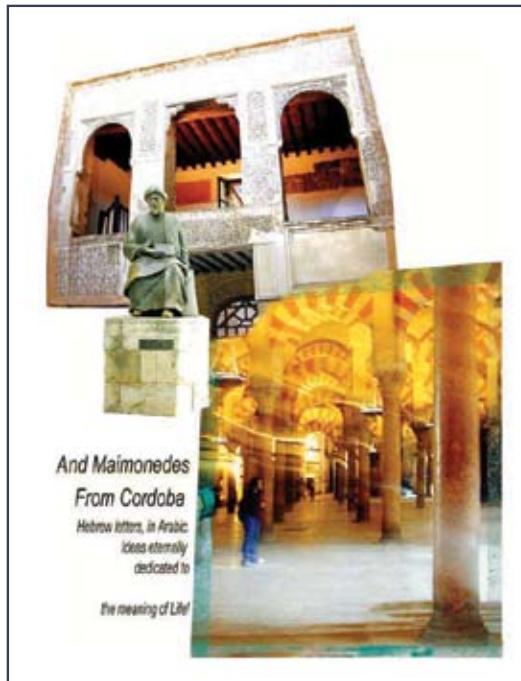
**ML:** They really began when we traveled to Israel (Tiberius) in the 1970s, then to Curacao, and on to a Caribbean cruise of the islands—Barbados and St. Thomas.

*"An Iberian Haggadah, or story" — the collages are from a 2002 rendition... I am using the term "Haggadah" here as the word story...*

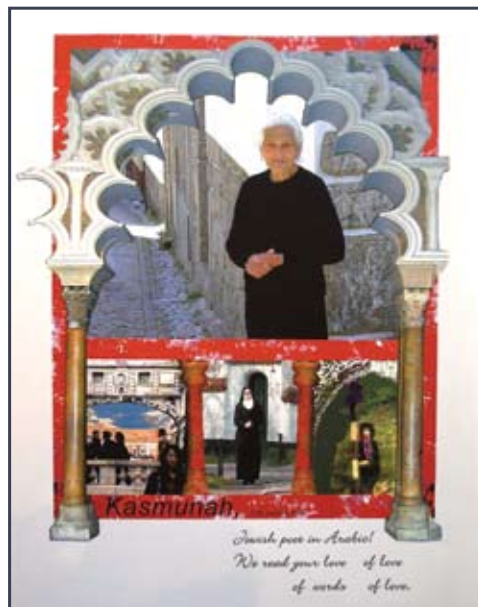
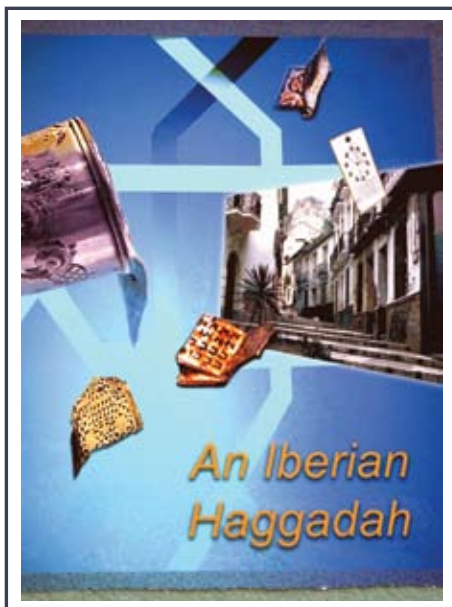
Everywhere we went from then on, we centered our activities on discovering our past Jewish life, whether it was Kaifeng (China), St. Petersburg or Prague. One major trip was the three-week Jewish Elderhostel trip to Iberia which offered incredible lectures, as well as behind-the-scenes visits to Jewish historic places, such as a 14th century *mikveh* outside Barcelona, or the new Jewish community of Belmonte, Portugal.

**CB:** Talk about your vast reference library.

**ML:** I have owned and cherished Jewish books, and books in general, for most of my life. When my mother would go to the public library each week, we would check out books to read. The impact of that time prompted this essay. (Excerpted here from "Those Letters in Black and White.")



"The library holds nine shelves, crammed with many hardback books, spaced by artworks I have created or collected. Today, I ride my ladder across my loft library shelves, touch a book here, dust another there, and reach to the end of the 14-foot ceiling as I rearrange books by topics. I have used my art and history collection for research on Jewish women artists. The cultural and sociological aspects of my presentations are the result of information gleaned from my books. I feel an intimacy connecting the past to the present and myself to others.



"Around me are books for my soul: I often ponder Franz Kafka's *The Trial* and remember sobbing as I read Cynthia Ozicks's *The Shawl* or Elie Weisel's *Ani Ma'Amin*. I am energized by the lives of Rachel, the actress, or the heroic Hannah Senesh. Could I name all my books; remember all their content? Not exactly. But like a Tibetan monk spinning a prayer wheel, I feel the thrill of touching my books; it inspires me. Books that can be attributed to most of the knowledge I have gained in this life; if I have had a love affair, I would say that it has been with books." >>>



**CB:** *What about the miniature rooms?*

**ML:** When I studied at the Chicago Art Institute, I would wait for my mother to pick up my sister and me. We would wait in the basement where the Thorne Rooms were displayed; magnificent miniature recreations of differing interiors of many historic eras. We studied them as we waited. In retrospect I have no doubt this influenced my interest in history, architecture and art as well. Many years later I felt the necessity to express what I had read about individuals, or certain times in Jewish eras, to different groups of people and created my own folk art miniatures. Also the slide presentations I create help tell the sociological and cultural aspects of the Jewish people.

**CB:** *What do you want people to take away from seeing your art?*

**ML:** I would like people to think about the good and wonderful experiences Jewish people have had in past eras. My goal is to help others get interested in past Jewish historic heroes and heroines; to inspire them to discover the joy of simply living as a Jewish person, not necessarily emphasizing the religious aspects, but encompassing Jewish culture. Whether it's lessons of Jewish lives or poems by children who endured life in a concentration camp, "without ever seeing another butterfly," I always feel moved to rededicate myself to the quest I hear over and over: "Don't forget me - I lived. Here are my handprints for you."

**CB:** *What renews you most?*

**ML:** I love retreating into my library as if into a cocoon; my writing and much of my artistic inspiration emerge from



## About the Miniature Rooms: Marilyn Lande's "Soul Companions"

The Jewish past comes alive in miniature rooms recreated from historic sources. Legendary characters inspire these detailed environments where real figures lived or worked. From plexi-

framed boxes to bird cages, each rendition is a reflection of a time and place, every object anchored in the real, or symbolic in some way. While thinking of a title for the exhibit on display at Denver University's new library, September 8 - December 10, 2014, Lande realized her soulmates are the very people she has researched in Jewish history. Thus, the title of the exhibit, "My Soul's Companions."

"All the miniature historical rooms,"

said Lande, "are based on the lives of real people, connected by more than a Hebrew timeline. I delve into the past of these individuals as if I were them and they were me. Some of those researched are the Sephardic poetess Kasmunah; the inspiring Doña Gracia Nasi; 18th century silversmith Myer Meyers—people I admired. At times I have felt their life experiences have been mine. Traumatic or triumphant, I believe I was there.





Left, *Doña Gracia Nasi*, circa 1540, Venice, Italy. “Not based on any detailed information,” said Lande, “but my imagination of what her life might have looked like as a hidden Jew.” (10” deep x 18” wide x 22.5” high)

Above, a *Portuguese–Holland Passover*, circa 1720, based on a compilation of 17th century woodcuts of Jewish life by engraver Bernard Picart. (14” deep x 15” wide x 11” high)

Right, *Marc Chagall, Studio in Venice*, France, circa 1960 (10” deep x 17.75” wide x 13” high)



what I find there. What prevails in my innermost thoughts is always to honor and remember the Jewish people by doing and being. Searching for the deeper meanings to living life as a Jew, my search has expanded my soul; my art, my trips, my research, my life—all to find my individual path. Fifty-five years later and looking back, I see that young, 16-year-old girl who fell in love with learning; who became knowledgeable about her past, and grew to be comfortable with being different—with being Jewish. 🔥

“Kasmunah was only 17 when she wrote of love in Arabic, living in Andalucia, Spain, during the time of the *Convivencia* (ca. 1100s to 1200s CE). Then Arab, Christian and Jew lived in cooperative peace, not under forced conversion, mayhem and murder. What was it like? I dream.

“I was also there with Beatrice de Luna in 1540 CE when she was jailed in the Bridge of Sighs prison in Venice for being a hidden Jew. I was

fearful, yet I knew she would escape. At 40, she introduced herself as Doña Gracia Nasi, a Jew. I followed her in all her adventures; the establishment of Tiberius as a land grant from the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire and the founding of the 500-year-old Jewish community in Turkey, as well. I stood by her as she sought to buy freedom for Jewish slaves and applauded her support of Jewish communities, synagogues and ritual

objects. I saw how she spurned Queen Elizabeth’s marriage offers to save England’s treasury—to instead save her own people.

“Today I carry these souls of history with me; in my art and in my books, and I can see them all. I feel a kind of love for them; these individuals are a part of me—they are my soul’s companions.” 🔥