



The art of  
**Ruth Warembud**

Edited by Jeremy Thornton

## The Art of Ruth Warembud

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To My Daughters  
Joan and Marylyn,  
My Grandchildren,  
and Great-grandchildren



Ruth Warembud in the 1960's

## Introduction

By the time Ruth Warembud began making art, she had already made a name for herself as a published composer of children's songs and musical plays. She had raised two disabled daughters and had become a grandmother. She was 45 years old.

Ruth Sass was born in 1917 in the Lower East Side of Manhattan where her Jewish neighborhood was vibrant with busy streets and pushcarts. Music was everywhere and Jews from different parts of Europe mixed together. Ruth's parents—who were first generation immigrants from Austria—were not religious, but her mother observed the Sabbath and lit the Friday night candles. Ruth remembers how her humble home was cleaned and put in order each week for the Sabbath. Years later she married Norman Warembud who shared her appreciation of Jewish life. Through their active association with the Yiddish Theater in New York, they cultivated their deep interest in traditional Jewish culture and music. The richness of New York and daily life in its Jewish ghetto would soon infuse Ruth's art.

Ruth began her art career in 1962 by taking a few courses. She was, however, determined to find things out for herself. She had an inborn sense of curiosity and a need to experiment with different techniques. Her early paintings demonstrate this with their dynamic range from pale atmospheric works to paintings with heavy tactile impasto.

In 1967, Ruth attended an Op Art exhibition at the Whitney Museum. Impressed with a painting by Bill Komodore, she began painting in just black and white. Quite a few of these works used subject matter from her Jewish heritage. But subject matter was not the only thing in these paintings that was important to Ruth. She was also considering the whole painting—discovering how the foreground and background were equally important, achieving balance between all the diverse elements, and exploring a painting's dimensions. She exhibited these paintings successfully in both one-woman and group shows.

Norman Warembud died in 1978. Several years later Ruth married Joe Leff, who not only encouraged her but also helped organize exhibitions of her work. Then Ruth took a sculpture class. She loved the feel of the clay in her hands. It reminded her of playing with the warm wax from the Sabbath candles. She became so excited by the first sculpture she made, that she gave up painting on canvas and put all her creative energy into working with clay. At this time, she also felt compelled to learn ceramic techniques. She shared a studio with Ephraim Vogel—a student of Chaim Gross—who not only gave her encouragement, but also shared his knowledge of making molds. As she worked within the limitations of a small kiln, she continued to grow and learn through simple trial and error.

So began an extremely creative period of expression. Ruth once again used Jewish themes to inspire her, but she also used her life experiences as a woman and a mother to express deep personal emotions. Ruth literally puts herself into these works. She is the bride snubbed by her mother-in-law. She is the best friend. She is, above all, the mother trying to cope, filled with both sorrow and joy. "I love my children, and the need to be with them is within the sculptures." Her daughters comfort her. Her family clings to her. She is passionate. These are deep, soulful works.

The sculptures bring all the different parts of Ruth's creativity together. The dancers dance to the Jewish folksongs she loves. The characters' clothes come from making her own dresses. The sculptures are meant to be touched and examined. "You can tell by looking at the work if I'm happy or sad," she tells us. They invite you to look at them from different angles.

At about age 80, Ruth needed to physically modify the way she worked. Inspired by Egyptian and Classical art, she began working in bas relief and created a new series of sculptures. In these works, she explored the use of shadow and light, rhythms, and shapes. Most recently, she has been revisiting some of her sculptures and bas reliefs, and painting them.

Today, Ruth lives in the same Lower East Side neighborhood where she has lived all her life, surrounded by many of the works depicted in this book. At 88, she is still actively engaged in looking and creating.



Some of the ceramic molds in Ruth's studio



Ruth in 2003, photo courtesy of City Meals On Wheels