

Calendar artist isn't the usual suspect

Women of Reform Judaism feature Boston lawyer Michael Bogdanow

By Leah Burrows

Special to the Advocate

Michael Bogdanow's small office in downtown Boston doesn't look like a typical lawyer's office. But then again, Bogdanow isn't a typical lawyer.

Decorating the walls above his bookshelves and file cabinets are vibrantly colorful paintings of landscapes and people, of starry nights and Hebrew letters – all works by the lawyer himself.

Bogdanow, the managing partner at the law firm Meehan, Boyle, Black & Bogdanow, was selected as the featured artist for the 5771 (2010/2011) Art Calendar issued by the Women of Reform Judaism. The 4-by-6 3/4-inch appointment book includes paintings and descriptions by the artist. About 5,000 copies were printed.

Much of Bogdanow's art is inspired by Jewish stories and themes. "I try to paint what is meaningful to me," Bogdanow, 56, said, "and Judaism and Biblical stories have always been a component of my life."

The attorney sees parallels between art and law. "You have to be willing to improvise in court, and the same goes for painting," he said. "With both you have to conceive an idea and figure out how to get that across to other people."

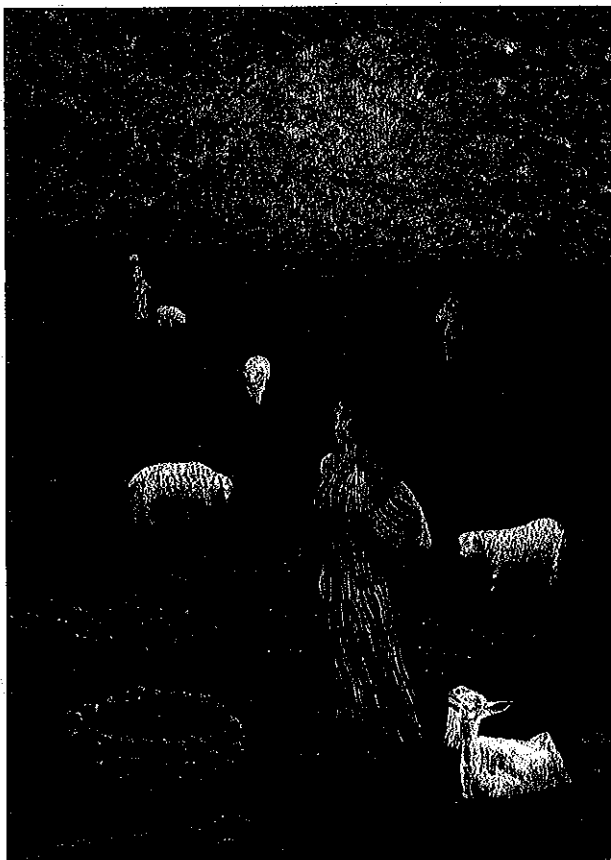
Raised in Houston, Bogdanow moved to Boston to attend Brandeis University in the early '70s. Although he had painted all of his life, Bogdanow said he originally planned to study theater. During his first semester, a friend encouraged him to take an art class with sculptor Peter Grippe. Bogdanow found his niche and his mentor.

Grippe, who passed away in 2002, took Bogdanow under his wing, giving him a large, disheveled studio in the basement of the fine arts building and teaching him how to sculpt with wood and metals.

After graduating from Brandeis in 1976, Bogdanow earned his master's in fine arts at Columbia University. He returned to Massachusetts to teach art in a local high school, but realized after a few years that full-time teaching wasn't for him.

"I knew I didn't want to teach forever, and art is a hard way to raise a family," said Bogdanow, who lives in Lexington with his wife, Margie. They have three grown children.

In the early 1980s, he applied to Harvard Law School. In the application, Bogdanow outlined the reasons art and law are similar. He also noted that both require an understanding of human nature and an ability to



"Rachel at the Well": Artist Michael Bogdanow notes that the shepherdess is so striking that Jacob falls in love with her at first sight – and "that even the goat in the painting is mesmerized by her."

connect with audiences.

He got in and graduated cum laude in 1984. His law firm generally takes the plaintiff's side in lawsuits. Among its high-profile cases was representing the family of the woman killed in the 2006 ceiling collapse in the Ted Williams tunnel.

As Bogdanow grew older, his art began to change. While Judaism had inspired his art from early on – in college, for example, he created a clay sculpture of Abraham smashing the 10 Commandments – in the '90s he turned to the Torah more and more.

When Bogdanow painted a scene based on his son's bar mitzvah Torah portion, some friends took notice. People began commissioning Bogdanow to create paintings for their children's bar or bat mitzvahs and for weddings and temple sanctuaries. Soon he was displaying his artwork at the Biennial, one of the largest Jewish conventions organized by the Union for Reform Judaism.

"It all kind of snowballed," Bogdanow said. "Some artists hate being in a niche, but for me the niche works."

His art appears in such books as "Wandering Stars: An Anthology of Jewish Fantasy and Fiction" and on the album cover of Peri Smilow's "The Freedom Music Project."

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Bogdanow is also a musician, playing piano in a contemporary Jewish band the Guys and in the rock band Titanic All Stars.

His paintings often include women. "As an artist, you paint what you like, and I like women," Bogdanow said. "I don't understand them, they're a mystery to me, and I think that's why I like painting them so much."

Many of Bogdanow's paintings in the calendar focus on Biblical women—from Miriam dancing at the Red Sea to Lot's wife staring at Sodom and Gomorrah to Rachel at the well.

"Full Circle," the painting on page 1, began with the idea of Jacob's ladder to heaven and then took on a life of its own, the artist said. It depicts a young couple at different phases in their budding relationship. Bogdanow said he often uses circles in his art. A perfect mathematical form, he said, "it symbolizes earth, life, the eye and sight, and the circle of life."

"Michael's art work was very spiritual in nature and spoke to the women on the calendar committee," said Shelley Lindauer, executive director of the Women of Reform Judaism. "His art is very visceral."

Bogdanow said that although the Torah inspires much of his art, he believes people of all religious backgrounds can relate to it.

"As an artist, the goal is always, with whatever you do, will this speak to someone? Can I connect with people from all different experiences and walks of life," Bogdanow said. "As a litigator, I ask myself that same question all the time."

For more on Bogdanow's art visit his Web site, www.michaelbogdanow.com. To purchase the calendar, visit www.womenofreformjudatasm.org.

Correction: A story in last week's *Advocate* incorrectly reported that Andrea Werner Insoft is the second female president of Temple Emeth in Chestnut Hill. She is the third; her predecessors were Barbara Diamond and Shoshanna Rosenthal. In addition, she uses Insoft as her last name, not Werner Insoft.