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MEMORIAL ART GALLERY PRESENTS *The Surreal Visions of Josephine Tota*

July 15–September 9, 2018



Rochester, NY, May 23, 2018 — The Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester (MAG) is pleased to announce *The Surreal Visions of Josephine Tota*. The exhibition will be on view at MAG from July 15 through September 9, 2018. With this exhibition and its accompanying catalog, The Memorial Art Gallery forges new territory in the introduction and exploration of a little-known and unconventional artist of significant talent.

Josephine Tota (1910–1996) was a seamstress and amateur artist who lived a conventional life among the Italian immigrant community in Rochester, New York. In her seventies, she spent countless hours painting in the privacy of her home, where she imbued over 90 small jewel-like paintings with the richness of her strange imagination. Themes of metamorphosis, family bonds, physical pain, human frailty, the natural world, loss, and tragedy dominate Tota's obsessive and otherworldly depictions. Despite her relative isolation in producing this body of work, Tota was profoundly influenced by years of amateur art classes at MAG's community art school, the Creative Workshop, and her personal interest in medieval and modern art.

It is this powerful body of work—dozens of intense paintings in egg tempera and gilding on board, completed at the end of her life—that *The Surreal Visions of Josephine Tota* explores and advocates for inclusion into the canon of self-taught, visionary art. "Unusual paintings like these," writes Curator in Charge/Curator of American Art Jessica Marten, "near death-defying expressions of a little-known artist's interior world, with incisive inquiries into womanhood, age, and power, rarely find their way inside an art museum's walls." *Surreal Visions* explores the "audacious and radical voice" of a singular artist almost lost to history and challenges our commonly held assumptions about female artists working outside the mainstream.

MAG is proud to offer this scholarly examination in recognition of the quality of Tota's work and the importance of her story. Because of the power of her paintings, their rich connection with her personal narrative, and her magical transformation of centuries of art-historical sources into an idiosyncratic style, Tota deserves careful review. In a broader sense, the exhibition and catalog explore currents within the

American experience primed for deeper art historical inquiry, such as the structural failure of the insider/outsider duality, the far-reaching legacy of Surrealism, the marginalization of female visionary artists, and the relationship between age and creative agency.

The Surreal Visions of Josephine Tota features over 90 paintings created by Josephine Tota; 14 from the collection of the Memorial Art Gallery, many never-before-seen paintings on loan from family and friends, and a small selection of ceramics and textiles. A fully illustrated catalog of the artist's late paintings published by [RIT Press](#) will accompany the exhibition and will feature essays by Jessica Marten and Janet Catherine Berlo, University of Rochester Professor, Art History/Visual and Cultural Studies.

About The Artist

Josephine Tota (1910–1996) was a seamstress and amateur artist who lived a conventional life among the Italian immigrant community in Rochester, New York. Her awakening to intensely personal subject matter and her discovery of the medium of egg tempera in her early seventies allowed Tota to tap into the stream of her extraordinary creative energy. Over the course of a decade, she channeled her dreams and a lifetime of memories into harrowing, self-referential images. Painting in the privacy of her home, she imbued over 90 small jewel-like paintings with the richness of her strange imagination.

Tota condensed myriad art-historical and popular culture sources—medieval illuminated manuscripts, early Renaissance panel paintings, the work of Surrealist icons Frida Kahlo and Salvador Dalí, fairy tales, and children's book illustrations—into private images of startling immediacy and timelessness. In 1990, an exhibition in the Creative Workshop's faculty and student exhibit space, which included over twenty of her late paintings and a small group of ceramic figures and masks, was the only time Tota's late paintings were exhibited during her lifetime. The paintings were not available for sale; almost everything remained in the artist's possession until her death.

About The Memorial Art Gallery

The Memorial Art Gallery showcases visual art from antiquity to the present day, including an outdoor public Centennial Sculpture Park. In addition to its permanent collection, MAG offers a year-round schedule of special exhibitions, lectures, concerts, tours, after-hours social events, and family activities.

Hours: Wednesday–Sunday 11 am to 5 pm, and until 9 pm on Thursdays and First Fridays. Closed Mondays and Tuesdays.

Admission: \$15; senior citizens, \$12; college students with ID and children 6–18, \$6. Always free to members, University of Rochester faculty/staff and students, and children 5 and under. Half-price general admission Thursdays from 5–9 pm is made possible in part by Monroe County. For more information, call 585.276.8900 or visit mag.rochester.edu.

Above: Josephine Tota, *Untitled*, 1984, egg tempera on panel, Collection of Rosamond Tota, daughter. Photograph by Andy Olenick, Fotowerks, Ltd.

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