

THIS IS NEW YORK

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The way to make any artist fighting mad is to say, "I don't know anything about art, but I know what I like." Consequently I was careful not to say it when I went to call on Mrs. Janet Sobel in Brighton Beach one day last week. Mrs. Sobel is a short, plump, bright-eyed grandmother who, within the last six years, has become one of America's most talked-about surrealist painters, thereby reversing the usual amateur-turned-professional story.

Once in a while the art world is thrown into an uproar by the discovery of an artist...middle-aged or older...who has taken to painting late in life for the fun of it. Critics find the pictures refreshing because they're simple and uncomplicated and galleries vie with each other to show the work of these primitives, as they're called. It's as if everybody had suddenly reached the saturation point of sophistication...a point, I might add, that I don't find it hard to reach at all. With...(illegible phrase) a case of how complicated can you get, before utter confusion sets in.

Mrs. Sobel isn't the least bit confused. "I'm a surrealist," she says. "I paint what I feel within me."

What Mrs. Sobel feels within evidently pays off. She's had two exhibitions of her work in New York's 57th Street. And by no stretch of the term could her paintings be called primitives. They're about as primitive as a B-29.

Until six years ago Mrs. Sobel had never attempted her art and to this day she's never had a lesson.

"How did you happen to start painting?" I asked her when I visited the canvas-stream apartment last week.

Mrs. Sobel smiled. "My son, Sol, is very talented and he urged me to try. I liked it so much I never stopped."

To illustrate her work, Mrs. Sobel pointed out a large canvas which she called CHRONICLE OF OUR ELDERS. That's when I refrained from making the statement about art and what I like. Mrs. Sobel tried to enlighten me. "It's the story of the persecution of great men who have devoted themselves to truth," she said. With an

intense gesture, she pointed to a face staring out from under a groping scarlet hand. "Christ was crucified," she explained, "because he...(illegible word) humanities departure from the truth." With a second stabbing gesture she pointed to a different face. "Moses, the great lawgiver, suffered for all mankind." Again the quick finger darted and identified a...(illegible word) figure in the somber shadows. "Hitler," she choked, "not only anti-Jew and anti-Christ, but a betrayer of all humanity."

The grandmother in Mrs. Sobel is just as strong as the artist. When John Dewey, world famous American philosopher, called on her in Brighton Beach he came to admire and talk about her paintings. But he stayed to consume her gefullte fish.

Which convinces me, at least, that there...(illegible phrase) when a Brooklyn grandmother makes a success of it...her in New York.