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Contact: Megan Searing-Young
E-mail: museum@greenbeltmd.gov
Phone: 301-507-6582
Website: <http://greenbeltmuseum.org/>

Benjamin Abramowitz: Greenbelt Museum Honors Prominent Local Artist

GREENBELT, MD, April 13, 2015 – In the month of April, the Greenbelt Museum will remember, honor, and celebrate artist Benjamin Abramowitz (1917–2011), who lived and worked in Greenbelt for 60 years. Susan Abramowitz Rosenbaum, his daughter and a frequent subject in his paintings and other works of art, as well as the caretaker who has preserved and managed his estate, will present the April 2015 FOGM lecture on her father’s life and legacy on **Tuesday, April 21, 2015, at 7:30 pm** at the Greenbelt City Community Center. The lecture will coincide with the unveiling of two Abramowitz paintings donated to the Greenbelt Museum by Pamela Gregory and Richard Marcus, long-time friends of the Museum. “The Greenbelt Museum is truly honored to receive the gift of these two important Benjamin Abramowitz paintings from Pamela Gregory and Richard Marcus,” says Megan Searing Young, Director of the Greenbelt Museum. Rosenbaum herself is the subject of one of the paintings, a study of neighborhood children playing in a sandbox, absorbed in their imaginary world.

In 1917, Abramowitz was born in Brooklyn, New York, to Russian immigrants. As a young child he was enraptured by art: signs, posters, and illustrations in everyday life and paintings and sculptures in museums. He walked for hours to study life drawing at the Brooklyn Museum School; at 16, the Brooklyn Museum honored him with his first solo exhibition. Later, he attended the National Academy of Design, absorbing the models of the avant-garde and social-realists and studying the masters. In 1936, he joined the Work Projects Administration (WPA) under the name of Ben Hoffman—although he returned to his birth name within a few years—and moved through the ranks as teacher, mural assistant, senior printmaker, and painter. He was 19 years old. Today, many of those works are in the collections of major museums. The Metropolitan Museum in New York holds eleven lithographs from the young artist, and the Newark Museum and St. Louis Museum also own prints. In 1941, with the world at war, Abramowitz moved to

Washington, D.C., taking on U.S. government graphic assignments. In 1942, expecting the first child, the family found a home on Eastway Road in Greenbelt, Maryland. He and his wife chose to make Greenbelt their base for both home and studio for more than half a century. During the postwar years, he engaged in critical personal and artistic evolutions. Two young children complicated his daily struggle for time and energy. Nevertheless, he led a successful multi-tiered existence. By day a lithographer at the U.S. Department of Agriculture for 25 years, he was driven by discipline and love for his vocation and drew and painted every night. He even carved out precious moments to study history and philosophy and taught himself seven languages, beginning with Latin and Greek.

By the time he was in his early 30s, Abramowitz had become a celebrated star in the growing Washington, D.C.-Baltimore regional art scene. From the 1940s on, critics, curators, and collectors enthusiastically sought out his work, and he reaped critical acclaim in solo and group exhibitions. He competed for and won virtually every prize. Reporters were fascinated by his capacity to turn out large numbers of canvases and also make time to shine family shoes with his kids. Major regional collections such as the Baltimore Museum of Art and the Phillips Collection began to purchase his work. The Corcoran Gallery of Art selected his work for its biennial exhibitions and featured two major solo exhibitions. By the mid-20th century, Abramowitz was recognized not only as a painter, but also as a teacher and “art coach” throughout the Washington metropolitan area. The Ford Foundation sent him throughout the country as an artist-in-residence to lecture and conduct seminars and critiques. All the while, he kept journals and maintained an active correspondence with critics, curators, and students. His appetite for visual statement drew him initially to the social and political chaos of the Depression, the suffering of the poor, and legends from the Old Testament. Tender portraits of his family, in a variety of media, continued throughout his life. He moved seamlessly and simultaneously to create hundreds of line drawings and watercolors, with emotive and dynamic forces punching through the paper.

Fascinated by calligraphy and line drawings throughout his life, he also filled dozens of sketchbooks during trips to Europe, intimate family vacations, and even as he talked on the telephone. By the 1970s, he moved beyond the canvas and turned to making elegant and iconic wall works and freestanding sculptures—some black, some white—filling book after book with ideas for more. He designed four books illustrating the basic principles of the creative experience. Until his mid-80s, when diminishing vision essentially prevented him from continuing to work, he created steadily and with the same discipline and vigor that marked his earlier years. In the later years, he worked exclusively with ink, producing

rhythmic forms that live and dance on paper. “I don’t know all the answers,” he said, “I am much more interested in the questions.” By 2008, his early work in the WPA became increasingly valuable and recognized, and is currently featured in a touring exhibition. Abramowitz’s distinguished lifework has been cited in numerous prestigious biographical volumes, and the National Archives of American Art holds hundreds of papers, letters, and other materials.

He died in 2011 at the age of 94, coincidentally the same day the Washington Post ran a major article on his life and the rediscovery of his work. His output as an artist was prodigious. He created more than 7,000 works including 175 sculptures, 470 paintings, and thousands of watercolors, ink drawings, sketches, and prints. In the last decades of her father’s life, Rosenbaum catalogued these works and his papers, aided by her father’s memory and his detailed notes. She is steward for all aspects of the collection. During the past three years, two substantial exhibitions have featured his WPA-era works on paper and his later brilliant color canvases; both received warm critical reviews. Several exhibitions are in the planning stages for 2016.

Abramowitz created many pieces that depicted social issues, such as poverty, racism, and the costs of war to soldiers and their families. These paintings and works on paper bristle with the passion, outrage at injustice, and social consciousness of Käthe Kollwitz or Ben Shahn. Abramowitz also depicted lighter, more intimate subjects such as the people, green spaces, and comfortable houses of his adopted hometown—with the bold, rich color palette and monumentality of Cezanne’s depictions of Aix-en-Provence. In his later life, partly because of his deteriorating vision, Abramowitz explored abstraction and color, a line of inquiry that also preoccupied painters such as Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, and other regional artists of the Washington Color School.

It is perhaps fitting that Abramowitz chose to live most of his life in the planned New Deal community of Greenbelt, where he raised a family and worked out of a two-story studio at the back of his home. The Greenbelt Veteran’s Cooperative—later known as Greenbelt Homes, Incorporated was not spared his sharp judgment and keen intelligence, but he was widely regarded in the community as a beloved neighbor, friend, parent, and teacher. The Greenbelt Library first presented a solo exhibition of his paintings and lithographs in 1944, and he also organized the First Annual Labor Day Festival Art Fair, a tradition that still continues.

Abramowitz's paintings will enhance the collection and programming of the Greenbelt Museum, delighting visitors from Greenbelt's early days and showing newcomers what life was like in one of the Green Towns. "The paintings embody so much of what is important about Greenbelt, its origins as a New Deal community, which provided relief work to hundreds, just as the WPA did; its emphasis on community, and its careful integration of architecture with green space, which, among many other benefits, provided children with ample, safe places to play," adds Young. "All of these elements are beautifully and movingly captured in these two Abramowitz paintings and we are immensely grateful to be able to share them with the community and beyond."

The lecture takes place at the Greenbelt City Community Center on 15 Crescent Road in Greenbelt, Maryland. This event is free, open to the public, and organized by the Friends of the Greenbelt Museum.

ABOUT THE GREENBELT MUSEUM

Greenbelt, Maryland is a National Historic Landmark planned community built in 1937 as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. Greenbelt was designed as a cooperative garden suburb that would be a model of modern town planning in America. The Greenbelt Museum allows visitors to experience Greenbelt's beauty and rich history through tours of an historic home, award-winning exhibits, public lectures, educational programs for children, and walking tours of the historic town. The Greenbelt Museum's historic house is open for tours on Sundays from 1pm to 5pm except for major holidays. The Museum is open by appointment only in January. For more information, visit greenbeltmuseum.org.