

JANUARY 24, 2025

GERSHON ISKOWITZ'S BRUSH OF RESILIENCE ON INTERNATIONAL HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE DAY

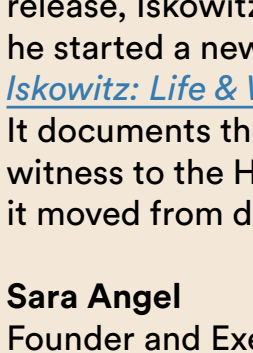
In the face of despair, Gershon Iskwowitz chose optimism.



Gershon Iskwowitz, *Action*, 1941, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



Gershon Iskwowitz, *Uplands B*, 1970, private collection.



Gershon Iskwowitz

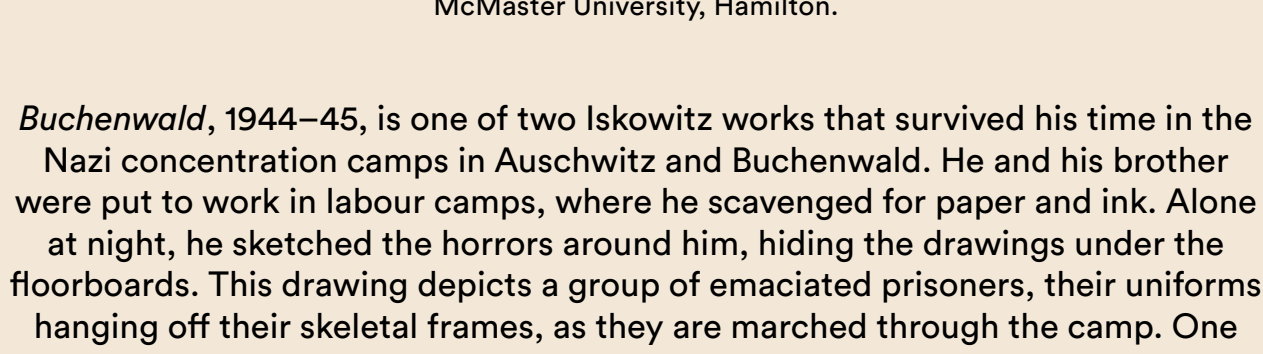
The great Polish-born Canadian Jewish artist Gershon Iskwowitz (1919–1988) is remarkable for the resilience that he showed in the face of despair. As we approach International Holocaust Remembrance Day next Monday, January 27, we are looking at his art. The date marks the anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration and Extermination Camp as a time to reflect on the murder of six million Jews and millions of others at the hands of the Nazi regime between 1933 and 1945. Iskwowitz was interned in Nazi camps for over two years. Yet while imprisoned, against all odds, he continued to draw with whatever materials he could find. Following his release, Iskwowitz arrived in Canada, settling in Toronto where he started a new life. In 2019, Ihor Holubizky wrote *Gershon Iskwowitz: Life & Work*, which is the source for today's newsletter. It documents the artist's remarkable legacy, his work that bears witness to the Holocaust, and how in the decades that followed, it moved from darkness to light.



Ihor Holubizky, author of *Gershon Iskwowitz: Life & Work*

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

WITNESS TO THE HOLOCAUST

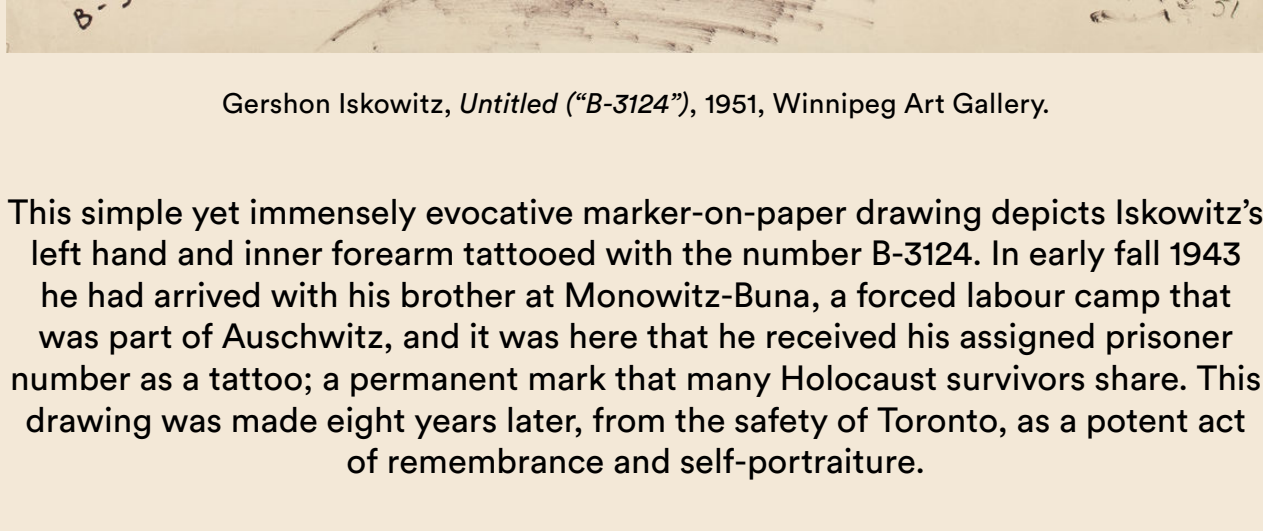


Gershon Iskwowitz, *Buchenwald*, 1944–45, McMaster Museum of Art, McMaster University, Hamilton.

Buchenwald, 1944–45, is one of two Iskwowitz works that survived his time in the Nazi concentration camps in Auschwitz and Buchenwald. He and his brother were put to work in labour camps, where he scavenged for paper and ink. Alone at night, he sketched the horrors around him, hiding the drawings under the floorboards. This drawing depicts a group of emaciated prisoners, their uniforms hanging off their skeletal frames, as they are marched through the camp. One has fallen and is being stepped over. Another looks out at us with his hands on his cheeks—a gesture like *The Scream*, 1893, by Edvard Munch (1863–1944)—to convey the camp's atrocities to viewers across time. Iskwowitz's time at Auschwitz was marked by fourteen-hour workdays in a cement factory and the omnipresent threat of torture and death.

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PRISONER NUMBER B-3124

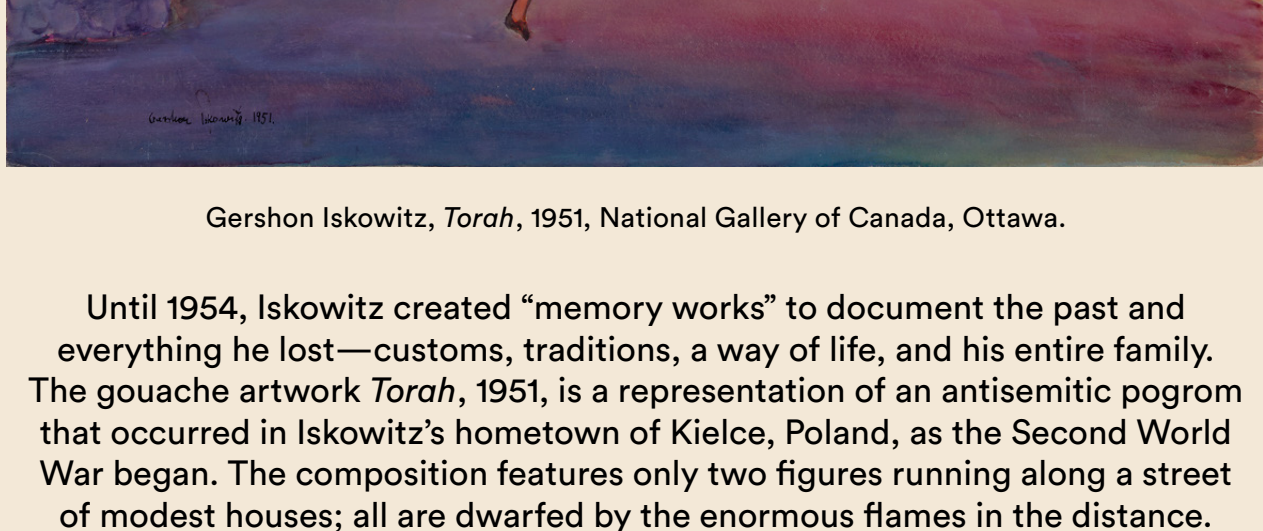


Gershon Iskwowitz, *Untitled ('B-3124')*, 1951, Winnipeg Art Gallery.

This simple yet immensely evocative marker-on-paper drawing depicts Iskwowitz's left hand and inner forearm tattooed with the number B-3124. In early fall 1943 he had arrived with his brother at Monowitz-Buna, a forced labour camp that was part of Auschwitz, and it was here that he received his assigned prisoner number as a tattoo; a permanent mark that many Holocaust survivors share. This drawing was made eight years later, from the safety of Toronto, as a potent act of remembrance and self-portraiture.

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MEMORY WORK



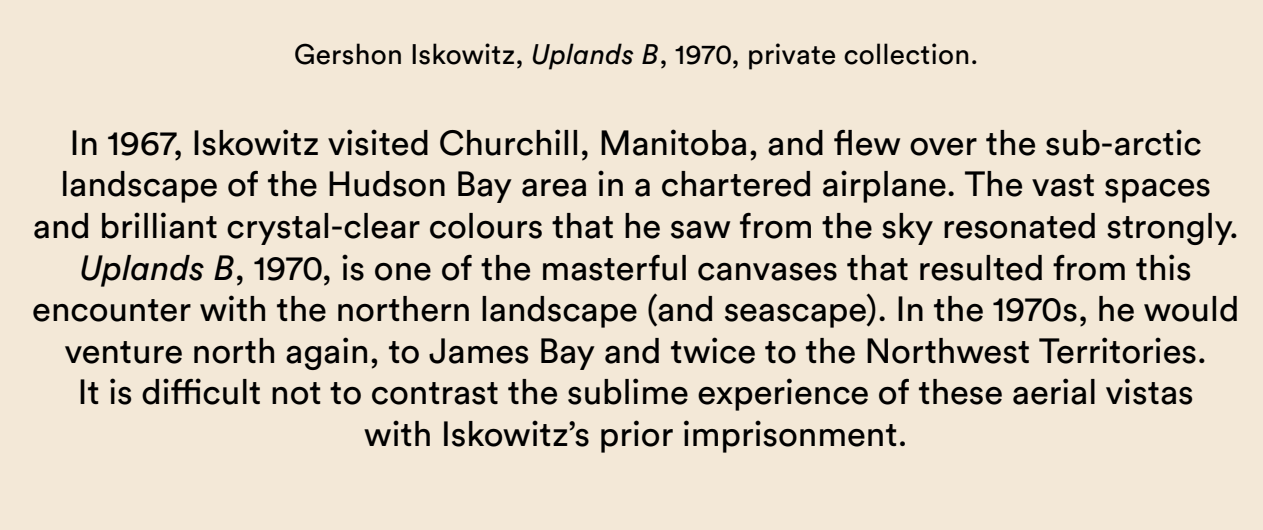
Gershon Iskwowitz, *Torah*, 1951, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Until 1954, Iskwowitz created "memory works" to document the past and everything he lost—customs, traditions, a way of life, and his entire family. The gouache artwork *Torah*, 1951, is a representation of an antisemitic pogrom that occurred in Iskwowitz's hometown of Kielce, Poland, as the Second World War began. The composition features only two figures running along a street of modest houses; all are dwarfed by the enormous flames in the distance. One of the figures is a rabbi holding a Torah, attempting to save the holy book from destruction.

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THE ART OF RESILIENCE

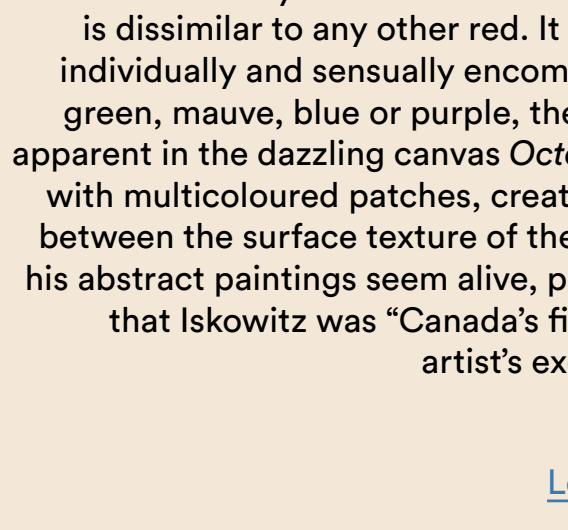


Gershon Iskwowitz, *Uplands B*, 1970, private collection.

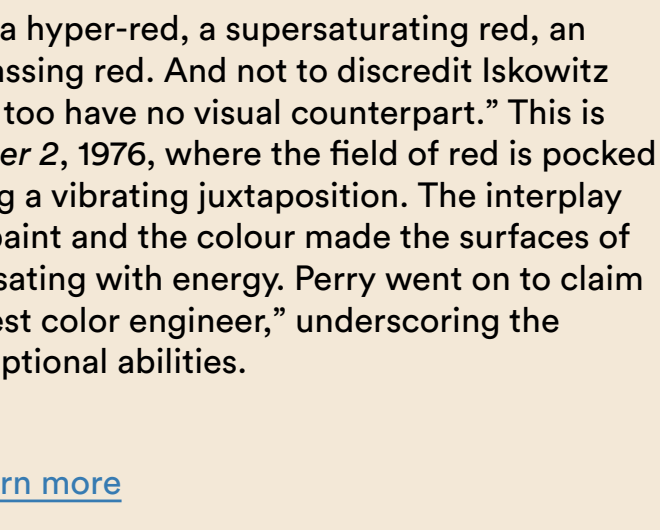
In 1967, Iskwowitz visited Churchill, Manitoba, and flew over the sub-arctic landscape of the Hudson Bay area in a chartered airplane. The vast spaces and brilliant crystal-clear colours that he saw from the sky resonated strongly. *Uplands B*, 1970, is one of the masterful canvases that resulted from this encounter with the northern landscape (and seascape). In the 1970s, he would venture north again, to James Bay and twice to the Northwest Territories. It is difficult not to contrast the sublime experience of these aerial vistas with Iskwowitz's prior imprisonment.

[Learn more](#)

CANADA'S FINEST COLOUR ENGINEER



Gershon Iskwowitz, *October 2*, 1976, private collection.

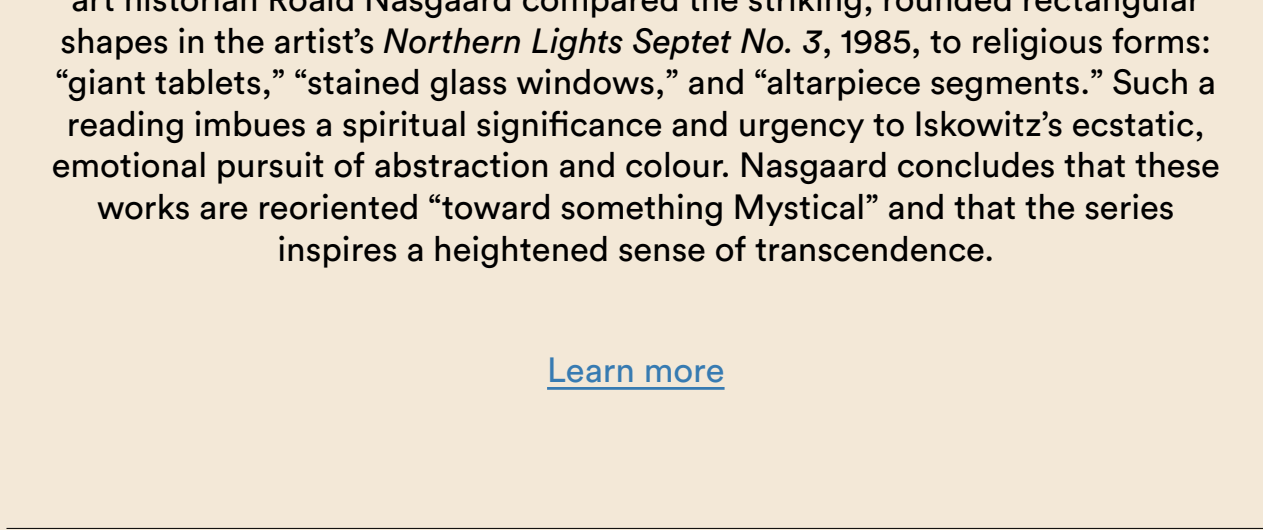


Gershon Iskwowitz with painting design for a limited-edition Art Gallery of Ontario umbrella, date unknown, photographer unknown.

Critic Art Perry said of Iskwowitz's distinctive use of colour: "An Iskwowitz red is dissimilar to any other red. It is a hyper-red, a supersaturating red, an individually and sensually encompassing red. And not to discredit Iskwowitz green, mauve, blue or purple, they too have no visual counterpart." This is apparent in the dazzling canvas *October 2*, 1976, where the field of red is pocked with multicoloured patches, creating a vibrating juxtaposition. The interplay between the surface texture of the paint and the colour made the surfaces of his abstract paintings seem alive, pulsating with energy. Perry went on to claim that Iskwowitz was "Canada's finest color engineer," underscoring the artist's exceptional abilities.

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WINDOWS OF TRANSCENDENCE



Gershon Iskwowitz, *Northern Lights Septet No. 3*, 1985, University of Lethbridge Art Gallery.

Iskwowitz did not like to talk about what happened to him during the Holocaust once he was in Canada, nor was he particularly observant Jew. Despite this, art historian Roald Nasgaard compared the striking, rounded rectangular shapes in the artist's *Northern Lights Septet No. 3*, 1985, to religious forms: "giant tablets," "stained glass windows," and "altarpiece segments." Such a reading imbues a spiritual significance and urgency to Iskwowitz's ecstatic, emotional pursuit of abstraction and colour. Nasgaard concludes that these works are reoriented "toward something Mystical" and that the series inspires a heightened sense of transcendence.

[Learn more](#)

A LEGACY OF HOPE



A selection of past winners of the Gershon Iskwowitz Prize. [1] Françoise Sullivan [2] Rebecca Belmore [3] Michael Snow [4] General Idea [5] Shary Boyle [6] Valérie Blass [7] Brian Jungen [8] Stan Douglas [9] Janet Cardiff and George Miller.

Iskwowitz's legacy continues to thrive, not only through the remarkable artworks he left behind but also through his Gershon Iskwowitz Foundation established in 1985. He credited the kickstarting of his career to the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and decided to establish his own annual monetary award for Canadian artists to help advance their work. The first Gershon Iskwowitz Prize was awarded in 1986, and recent winners include Faye HeavyShield (b.1953), Ken Lum (b.1956), and Tim Whiten (b.1941). As a Holocaust survivor, Iskwowitz's day-to-day resilience and his artistic practice "affirmed a new life and freedom, one [he] shared with fellow artists and friends through his work," in Ihor Holubizky's words.

[Learn more](#)

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Image Credits: [1] Gershon Iskwowitz, *Action*, 1941, pen and black ink, watercolour, and gouache on wove paper, 39.2 x 62.3 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Gift of Joey, Toby, and Alan Tanenbaum, Toronto, 1998 (39900). Courtesy of the National Gallery of Canada. © Gershon Iskwowitz Foundation. Photo credit: NGC. [2] Gershon Iskwowitz, *Buchenwald*, 1944–45, watercolour on paper, 39.5 x 52.3 cm. Collection of the McMaster Museum of Art, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario. Levy Bequest Purchase, 1993 (1993.003.0001B). Courtesy of McMaster Museum of Art. © Gershon Iskwowitz Foundation. Photo credit: John Tamblin. [3] Gershon Iskwowitz, *Untitled ('B-3124')*, 1951, felt marker on paper, 35.5 x 43 cm. Collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery. Courtesy of the Gershon Iskwowitz Foundation. © Gershon Iskwowitz Foundation. Photo credit: Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. [4] Gershon Iskwowitz, *Torah*, 1951, gouache and brush and black ink on illustration board, 43 x 53.3 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Gift of Joey, Toby, and Alan Tanenbaum, Toronto, 1998 (39909). Courtesy of the National Gallery of Canada. © Gershon Iskwowitz Foundation. Photo credit: NGC. [5] Gershon Iskwowitz, *Uplands B*, 1970, oil on canvas, 213 x 335 cm. Private collection. Courtesy of Miriam Shiell Fine Art, Toronto. © Gershon Iskwowitz Foundation. [6] Gershon Iskwowitz, *October 2*, 1976, oil on canvas, 139.7 x 119.4 cm. Private collection, Courtesy of Consignor Canadian Fine Art. © Gershon Iskwowitz Foundation. [7] Gershon Iskwowitz with painting design for a limited-edition Art Gallery of Ontario umbrella. © Gershon Iskwowitz Foundation / Art Gallery of Ontario. Photo credit: AGO. [8] Gershon Iskwowitz, *Northern Lights Septet No. 3*, 1985, oil on canvas on shaped plywood in seven sections, overall: 233.5 x 410.2 cm. University of Lethbridge Art Collection, Gift of the Gershon Iskwowitz Foundation (1995.91). Courtesy of the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery. © Gershon Iskwowitz Foundation. [9] The Gershon Iskwowitz Prize past winners. [1] Françoise Sullivan [2] Rebecca Belmore [3] Michael Snow [4] General Idea [5] Shary Boyle [6] Valérie Blass [7] Brian Jungen [8] Stan Douglas [9] Janet Cardiff and George Miller. Reproduced in *Gershon Iskwowitz: Life & Work* by Ihor Holubizky (Toronto: Art Canada Institute, 2019).