L&A Treasures
By Martha L. Berg, Archivist, Rauh Jewish Archives

Sibyl Barsky Grucci Papers
When Sibyl Barsky showed her sculpture in the mid-1930s, the Pittsburgh Sun-Telegram headlined the 30-year-old as a "girl artist." Born in 1905, Barsky came to Pittsburgh from Russia as a child of eight; when her parents died, she and her older sister took care of their four younger brothers. She studied painting at Carnegie Tech (now Carnegie Mellon University) but was self-taught as a sculptor, using kitchen knives, fingernail files, and needles until she could afford professional tools.

Beginning in 1933, Barsky exhibited her work with the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh. In 1934, she won the first sculpture award given in that show for a realistic portrait bust of Morris Rom, a local businessman. She also worked for the Pittsburgh group of the Federal Art Project, a program of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). For $95 a month, each of the group's six painters and sculptors was provided with materials with which they created works of art for schools, museums, and other civic institutions.

In 1940, Barsky married Joseph Grucci, a poet and professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh and Penn State University. Sibyl Barsky Grucci worked in clay, plaster, wood, stone, and bronze, and her sculptures are in public and private collections throughout the country. One notable work is her bust of Fred Lewis Pattee, prominently displayed in the foyer of the Pattee Library in State College. "The Young Dancer," a limestone piece first exhibited at the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh show in 1935, is in the Grucci Poetry Center, also at Penn State.

Another of Grucci's sculptures, a bronze portraithead of Hyman Blum, can be seen on the sixth floor of the Heinz History Center, part of a display of materials from the Blumcraft Company, a local architectural metalworking company with an international scope. Founder Hyman Blum helped Grucci in the 1940s by providing studio space and materials, and she sculpted him in return. The artist was not indicated when the Blum family donated their collection; it was Sibyl who identified herself on a recent visit. She subsequently donated her papers to the Rauh Jewish Archives at the History Center.

Two oral histories form part of the collection, and in them Grucci remembers her childhood spent in the Hill District and the East End. Later, while she was taking night classes at Carnegie Tech, she became friends with well-known Pittsburgh artist Samuel Rosenberg. An undated drawing of Grucci by Rosenberg is in the collection, along with some of Grucci's own drawings and many photographs of her sculptures.

Sibyl Barsky Grucci recently moved to California. At the age of 101, she still spends time on sculpture, lately repairing some of her pieces damaged in transit.

The Library & Archives collects materials related to the history and culture of Western Pennsylvania. The L&A is open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, or visit the Historic Pittsburgh website at http://digital.library.pitt.edu/pittsburgh for the online catalog and other useful tools.