

FROM THE PANEL: THE ART OF SEEING ENVISIONING JEWISHNESS What's Jewish About Jewish Art?

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I want to consider two issues: first, the nature of Jewish art and, second, a way to think about Jewish art that can encompass works ranging from the religious to the secular.

First, the nature of Jewish art.¹ A quick answer is that there is no such thing as Jewish art. There are works of art with Jewish subject matter and there are also works that might reflect aspects of Jewish culture that can extend from the religious to the secular and from the old-fashioned traditional to the modern assimilative. The range is very broad, but there is no such thing as art that is quintessentially or essentially Jewish. To make such a claim, one would have to assume that since the time of Abraham or the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai, Jews have been a monolithic block of people with no distinctions made between rich and poor, rural and urban, religious and secular, male and female, Sephardic, Ashkenazic, African, Middle Eastern and south Asian, or those from entirely Jewish or religiously mixed ancestry—let alone converts.

It is more interesting to find out what people thought Jewish art might be rather than what Jewish art is. And here the range is equally wide, mostly based on wishful thinking and impossibly bad sociology. Just a few examples. In the 1930s, the great English art critic, Sir Herbert Read, obviously catering to his own prejudices, lumped all Jews, past and present, into an undifferentiated mass when he argued that Jewish art does not exist because Jews were still a desert, nomadic race.² Even though Jews had lived for centuries in stable Jewish neighborhoods in cities where rain in fact did fall, he found that “the Jew still retains the essential mobility of temperament, the inquietude, that distinguishes his forefathers.” He also held that the Jewish art that did exist was romantic and did not respect form as Aryan art did because Jewish art avoids “the definite and static. It sees in painting not a means of interpreting the outer world, but a means of expressing the inner self. That is why it uses the essential types of individualistic art—lyricism and symbolism.” According to Read, then, all Jews, past and present, all lumped together as a single entity, nevertheless managed to produce artists who were individualistic in their lyricism and symbolism, There is a very serious disconnect here.

Let us move in a different direction now. Much more recently, art critic Robert Pincas-Witten said in 1975 that Jewish art was basically abstract because of its origins, first, in the middle eastern antagonism to figural art and second, in the Jewish commitment to the Second Commandment.³ Pincas-Whitten held that the Jewish preference for abstraction predated modern abstraction. Therefore, following his logic, modern art had finally caught up with the Jewish attitude toward art.

Others suggested that Jews thought about objects rather than looked at them. One

critic, Aaron Spivak thought that Jews had a congenital defect to see the plastic, the pictorial, the form in nature.⁴ Therefore, Jews became important only with the advent of modern art because of its abstract, intellectual, and even algebraic qualities exemplified by cubism and futurism. So here Jewish genetics merged with twentieth century art.

The opposite point of view was taken by Daniel Sperber in 1963 who argued that “the Jewish artist could never approach art purely intellectually. It was from intellectualism that he tried to escape to the freedom of emotionalism, the exact reverse of Pincas–Witten’s and Spivak’s positions.”⁵

Now, let us move in yet another direction. The cosmopolitan European Waldemar George argued in 1923 that Jewish art has a nervous, anxious character, an instability and even a sense of exaltation. But just a few years earlier, in 1920, Abram Efros in Russia found Jewish art to have an elegiac contemplativeness about it.⁶ So go figure if Jewish art is intellectual or emotional, neurotic or contemplative, the work of individuals or of group think, in tune with the twentieth century or independent of all time constraints.

Several artists and critics met in New York in 1948 and 1949 to discuss the nature of Jewish art. Their comments are truly embarrassing.⁷ Some mentioned that environment was an important factor—meaning where one lived—but if one lived as a Jew, philosophized and conducted oneself as a Jew, then something Jewish would vibrate in an artist’s work. A Jewish environment, then, not a geographical location was the important factor. Others thought that a Jewish spirit permeated a Jewish artist’s work. Clearly, this point of view was predicated only on an eastern European heritage. Be all that as it may, I think what these comments really meant was that the artists and writers were really talking about a handful of male artists born, like themselves, in Eastern Europe around the turn of the century, Chagall being the paradigm. This point of view, then, is not so much universally Jewish as eastern European Jewish of a certain generation fixed in time and space. Saul Raskin, the writer and artist, made the most amazing comment at these meetings in 1948 and 1949. He insisted that because eastern art is traditionally two-dimensional and western art is three-dimensional, then Jewish art, a product of the east and west, is “a sort of two and a half dimensional style.” Perhaps he meant that as a joke. But who knows?

What I am suggesting is that no coherent meta-narrative exists about the nature of Jewish art and anybody who tries to define one is doomed to failure. Such a person must assume that Jewish experience is static rather than evolutionary, as if Jewish art is in a holding pattern between the giving of the Torah at Sinai and the coming of the messiah, that there is a Jewish gene for a certain kind of art, and that experiences of individuals over the centuries and in different countries are of no consequence.

Ben Shahn neatly summed things up when he said “There are Jewish artists and there are even Jewish themes, but there is no Jewish art. If you would like to have Jewish art, Israel would have to be isolated from the rest of the world for years.”⁸ But then we would have Israeli art, not a Jewish art. I leave the final word on the matter to Kitaj who riffing on Marcel Duchamp’s famous aphorism, “It’s art if I say it is,” said “I believe my art is Jewish if I say it is.”⁹

What about art made by Jewish artists in America? And let me state right here that I am not making a value judgment but simply observing the scene as I see it. One way to think about the works of Jewish American artists is to imagine a spectrum that extends from those artists who find their subject matter in the Bible, the Talmud, kabbalah, and in the daily and high holiday prayer books and then extends to those who insist that their Jewish heritage influences their basically secular subject matter and reaches on to those who will have nothing to do with Judaism. Those who find subject matter in the ancient texts are to my mind working within the religion either in traditional ways or in updating their approaches to suit modern needs by including, say, feminist takes on biblical women, or finding in kabbalah some ways to deal with their spiritual needs, or exploring particular biblical episodes for their modern psychological or existential possibilities. Artists at this end of the spectrum might be religiously observant or find in this subject matter a way to self-identify as Jews in an open, not necessarily religious manner, or they might prefer Jewish spiritual exploration rather than those of other spiritual systems—say, Zen or Hindu chakra. To give these artists some kind of name, I would call their work *intrinsic* to Judaism, intrinsic to the religion and to its evolution in America in Orthodox, modern Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, or Jewish Renewal circles.

I would call those at the other end of the spectrum artists whose work is *extrinsic* to Judaism. They are clearly in the majority. Their work might be considered culturally but not religiously Jewish. Some have had a religious education, some have not or have chosen to ignore it. Their issues tend to be those dealing with assimilation, politics, the Holocaust, and social and women's issues. Some will say that their secular Jewish heritage, however defined, influences their choice of subject matter. The works of these artists are historically important because these become an index of how Jewish American artists enter the mainstream but nevertheless keep some kind of Jewish identity. I imagine the situation is quite different in other countries—so that in the larger history of Jewish artists accommodating to the particular environments in which they live, the story of culturally assimilated Jewish American artists forms an important and probably unique chapter.

There are at least two works that symbolically encapsulate the entire spectrum as I have suggested earlier. At one extreme, there is a work that seems to be entirely within the mainstream and that seems to carry no religious or cultural baggage or at least no obvious telltale signs of its assimilation into that mainstream. The most famous example is *The Enigma of Isadore Ducasse* (1920) by Emmanuel Radnitsky who is known as Man Ray, the great dada artist. *The Enigma* consists of a sewing machine wrapped in a blanket and placed on a table. It is based on Ducasse's statement: "beautiful as the chance meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table." The enigma of the title is in wondering what lies wrapped in the blanket. Is it a sewing machine? Probably. But the real enigma of the title is Man Ray himself because in this and in several other dada works he was literally and psychologically hiding the fact that his father was an immigrant tailor.¹⁰ By the time he had created this work, Man Ray had reinvented himself as a mainstream artist by hiding his family heritage, or really his Jewish background.

At the other extreme, a work that encompasses religious and cultural elements,

is Ben Shahn's *Ram's Horn and Menorah* of 1958. In the lower part, we see beneath a menorah, five differently colored heads that represent different races and indicate racial equality. Just above, a man blows a *shofar*, a ram's horn, announcing the presence of God. In the center the hand of God emerges from a small area of flames, suggesting God's ability to intervene in human affairs. And at the top, there are lines written in Hebrew from the prophet Malachi which state: "Have we not one father? Hath not God created us? Why do we deal treacherously every man against his brother, to profane the covenant of our ancestors?" One would think that this is little more than a civil rights painting by a left-wing artist who is also invoking God's blessing—certainly an appropriate subject for the late 1950s with some religion thrown in. But if one reads the commentaries to the passages in Malachi, one finds a different story. Briefly, the passages were written after the Second Temple was rebuilt. Historically, Malachi was rebuking Jews for abandoning Jewish rituals, for the increasing divorce rate, and for the rising number of intermarriages. The appeal, "have we not one father," is not about racial equality but about fading Jewish family loyalty, about one father for all Jews. The passage, "to profane the covenant of our ancestors," refers directly to intermarriage, considered to be a menace to the covenant with God and to Israel's existence. It should be noted that Shahn was then married to non-Jew, was known to have neglected the children from his first marriage, and did not get along with his mother. So the painting, done in 1958, ten years after the creation of the State of Israel, is about keeping the new modern nation strong, about social values—in this instance civil rights—and about Shahn's own personal life and family values. Surprisingly for an old leftist, there is a lot of religious imagery.¹¹

So, while I am suggesting characteristics that distinguish works which in varying degrees are intrinsic or extrinsic to the Jewish religion, I am also saying that all of these works are important to the ongoing history of Jewish art in America. We are not dealing with a monolithic history—that there is only one kind of Jewish art in America or one way to define Jewish art. Any single artist might at one time or other create works along the entire spectrum of religious-to-secular art or combine in one work different parts of that spectrum. I find this wide-open aspect of Jewish American art very exciting and, for me, the most interesting way to look at religiously and culturally Jewish works by Jewish artists. Or to say it differently, there are artists who are Jewish and there is Jewish art but, taking into account heritage, degree of religiousness, gender, and all the other variables, there is no single common denominator that can encompass all of Jewish art from way back when.

Notes

¹ Material on the nature of Jewish art is taken from my essay, "What's Jewish About Jewish Art: Some American Views," *Art Criticism* 20 (No. 1): 76–85. Parts of this essay were included in my *Jewish Art in America: An Introduction* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), xiii–xx.

² Herbert Read, *The Meaning of Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968 [1931]), 219, 220.

³ Robert Pincas-Witten, ix Propositions in Jewish Art," *Arts Magazine* 50 (December 1975): 67, 69.

⁴ Aaron Spivak, "The Jew Enters the Plastic Arts," *The Menorah Journal* 16 (May 1929): 403–407.

⁵ Daniel Sperber, "Trends in Modern Jewish Art," *Judaism* 12 (Winter 1963): 30.

⁶ Waldemar George, "Introduction," *Jüdische Künstler unserer Zeit* (1929), cited in Margaret Olin, *The Nation Without Art: Examining Modern Discourses on Jewish Art* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 160; and Abram Efros, "Zamethi ob iskusstve," in *Novyi* 48–49 (1916),

cited in John E. Bowlt, "From the Pale of Settlement to the Reconstruction of the World," in Ruth Apter-Gabriel, ed., *Tradition and Revolution: The Jewish Renaissance in Russian Avant-Garde Art, 1912-1928* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1987), 44.

⁷ I worked from a microfilm copy in the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, the John Weischel Papers, Roll N60-2, Frames 122-144 of the essay written by Nochum B. Minkoff entitled "Artists and Scholars View Yiddish Art: Notes on the Symposiums at the Yiddish Art Center" included in the pamphlet, *Jewish Art Center: Aims and Aspirations*, published by the Congress for Jewish Culture in 1949.

⁸ Alfred Werner, "An Interview with Ben Shahn," *Congress Bi-Weekly* 33 (March 7, 1966): 23.

⁹ *R.B. Kitaj: How to Reach 72 in a Jewish Art* (New York: Marlborough, 2005), 8.

¹⁰ Milly Heyd, "Man Ray / Emmanuel Radnitsky: Who is Behind *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse?*," in Matthew Baigell and Milly Heyd, eds., *Complex Identities: Jewish Consciousness and Modern Art* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 115-141.

¹¹ For more about these aspects of Shahn's work, see my *American Artists: Jewish Images* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 94-116.