

NOTES FROM THE DECORATIVE ZONE: EMBELLISHMENT AND MEANING IN JEWISH VISUAL ART

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Introduction: Embellishers

Jews are embellishers. Give us a story, and we add footnotes and digressions as we tell the story. We take seemingly simple texts, we examine them, we multiply them with meanings and interpretations influenced by centuries of tradition and local modernity, mixed together with structures that both clarify and complicate. We make everything several things at once, and then argue over what it really is after all. We do not just reject the singular, we do not even consider it.

Common wisdom is that culture is carried in language, and without a common language, a cultural group loses particular modes of thought. As an artist, I would argue that the structure of language is simply a reflection of cultural modes of thinking, and that these modes can be communicated and expressed by other means, and that in this way aspects of culture can be shared by people who speak different languages, and that, conversely, people who share a language may have varying ways of structuring thoughts.

My thoughts about Jewish art as a way of organizing visual information closely parallels the observations of Dana Hollander on the definition of Jewish philosophy. Just as Hollander argues that Jewish philosophy may be a way of thinking in the Jewish tradition rather than merely thinking about Jewish questions, so I would argue that Jewish art has to do with compositional motifs more than imagery of Jewish subjects.¹

The Jewish tradition of making, representation, and telling transcends language. We know this when we travel and discover other expressions of Jewish culture, and feel some connection that touches so deeply that we can not always define it, Is it form? Content? Signifier? Signified? Too often when we think of ourselves as artists, we rely on defining ourselves in terms of the cultural and linguistic enclave in which we live, accepting the fact that our artistic language is bound by language to the tradition of our neighbors. As Jewish artists, we are culturally bilingual, building on our own a distinctive intellectual traditions, as well as working within the context of our contemporary societies.



*top: Synagogue Lamp
Essaouria, Morocco
below:
Orchard Street Shul
Lamp
New Haven,
Connecticut
Photographs by
C. B. Rubin*

¹ Dana Hollander, "Is Deconstruction a Jewish Science? Reflections on 'Jewish Philosophy' in Light of Jacques Derrida's *Judéités*," *Philosophy Today*, special issue on *Jewish Philosophy Today*, Claire Elise Katz, ed. (Chicago: DePaul University, Spring 2006) vol.50, no. 1 pp. 128-138

Decorators

We decorate the things we love. These words spoken in 1993 by Rabbi Emeritus Max B. Wall, of Ohavi Zedek Synagogue, in Burlington, Vermont, have stayed with me for over a decade.² That afternoon, I had taken a group of art students from a class on multi-cultural art to visit the permanent exhibition at the Synagogue, following visits to the Museum to see African Art and Native American art. Echoing the notion that every symbol stood for something of greater significance, the students seemed puzzled by silver Torah pointers with motifs taken from nature.

Rabbi Wall explained that sometimes a beautiful pattern is just an expression of loving adornment. It is a layer of embellished meaning, it is the extra bit of human touch that makes the object speak to us, to carry us beyond the obvious. That these patterns themselves were influenced by the countries and times in which Jews were living, is only natural; what is more important is the concept of giving us many meanings at once: form, function, embellished decoration, possible references to nature, and styles from a temporary homeland. As in the examples of the two lamps, one from early 20th century North America and the other from an unknown date in Morocco, we sense a similarity of intention beyond the fact that the forms and actual designs are so different. It is the similarity in intention that is meaning, that provides the link, not the actual choice of motif.

Jewish Visual Language

Steeped in mainstream Western Art notions of representation, too often we look for a singular definition of art. When we think of Jewish art, we often envision art that is about Jews and the Jewish experience, cultural artifacts in the form of painting or sculpture created with the language of non-Jewish culture to describe the particularities of Jewish culture. This definition of Jewish Art can make us a bit uncomfortable, however. North Americans dislike nostalgia. We crave a world of innovation, looking for new ideas, new combinations, new objects. Works based on obvious subject matter border on nostalgia; border on the ordinary.

But could there be a Jewish sensibility, a Jewish way of thinking, that goes beyond the obvious subject matter? When we look at traditional Jewish texts, we see layers of meaning, layers of commentary and embellishments both visual and textural. In the Marseilles Bible, the Biblical text is interspersed with carpet pages, which in turn are pages of decorative motifs derived from local Spanish architecture surrounded by micrography, little writing that winds around with comments and references.

As our art history is rewritten to reclassify as art such bits of our traditions such as decorated menorahs, Torah blankets, and illuminated manuscripts hidden in obscure "oriental" collections, we face a new challenge. How do we incorporate a tradition of decoration into notions of art that for many of us are centered on a conceptual dialogue derived from a mainstream history of church painting, portraiture, and representational narrative?

² Max B. Wall, Rabbi Emeritus Ohavi Zedek Synagogue, presentation to University of Vermont class, 1993

As decorators, our motifs of cultural distinction may not be the motifs themselves, but how we use them. We are a deracinated people; we wander from influence to influence. We embrace our local cultures, then we mix them with the next cultural home. The decorations on our objects, our artistic traditions would not be true art if they did not include a synthesis of influences. After all, artists do not simply mimic earlier styles. The notion of mindless mimicry, of simple reproduction according to established guidelines, which is what got traditional Jewish art put in the basement of decorative art in the first place.

Abstract painting never claimed to have burst on the scene without deep roots in art history, but that history was singularly defined as the cannon of Western Art. When the period of abstraction rubbed shoulders with the period of the civil rights movement, there was an impetus to create a parallel movement in identity art, based on Western notions of representation. Alternatively, specific motifs were used as signifiers of identity, but this was not a great fit for Jewish art, because often motifs in Jewish decorative art are mixed with the legacies of the various host countries that have been home for the Jews over the centuries. Using traditional standards, it is difficult to point to Jewish visual art outside of ceremonial objects, which in turn were fashioned according to the styles of non-Jewish culture of the time and place in which they were fabricated.

If culture is a way of thinking, perceiving, and distilling, then art that is reflective of Jewish intellectual traditions is as much Jewish art as work that is done in mainstream styles, depicting Jewish subject matter. Is possible that Jewish art is better defined by relating it to the stream of Jewishness that centers on the debate of interpretation, the layers of meaning, and ambiguity of faith described by Rosenzweig, and echoed again by Dana Hollander, as he argues that true Jewish philosophy describes patterns of interpretation rather than experience?³ For most of us schooled in the critical discourse of Abstract Expressionism, turning to representational art in the 1970s was unthinkable. We were determined to communicate in abstract rhythm of color, form, and spatial interaction. Isn't the tradition of visual production one of the very thing that embodies culture?

Jewish Artists, Jewish Thinkers

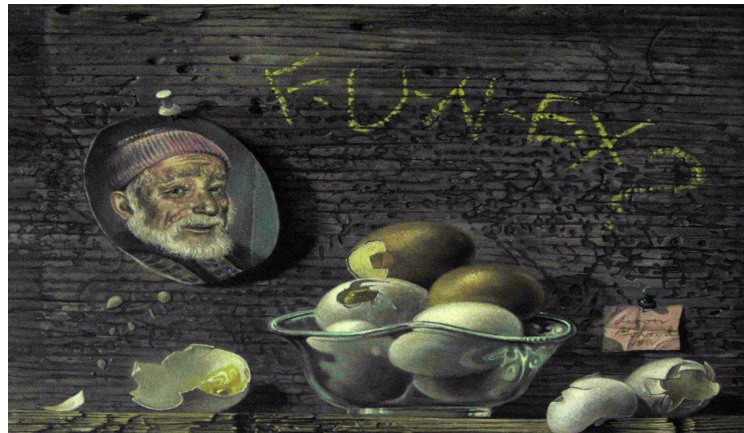
The ability to weave many meanings, to refuse a singular meaning, is not a uniquely Jewish trait, but it is a tendency that is evident in the work of many Jewish artists. Is it important that a Jewish artist think that the work is Jewish? Might it just be a tolerance for complexity that is rare in mainstream art that makes the work more than just the ordinary American cultural work?

Aaron Bohrod, an artist who was active from the period of World War Two until his death in 1992, considered himself an artist who was Jewish rather than a Jewish artist.⁴ The distinction is particularly relevant in talking about an artist of his generation, because, as an artist who was heavily influenced by the Ashcan school of art, he would have been expected to define his work by his subject matter, which was rarely "Jewish". But as Bohrod's career progressed, he moved from single image to complex collage-

³ Hollander, p. 129

⁴ Neil Bohrod (Aaron Bohrod's son), interview with the author, April 21, 2007

like paintings, where one visual element embellished the others, and no one fragment could convey the sense of the whole. Bohrod never denied his Jewishness, but his imagery was built of a complexity of word and image puns, art historical references, and other layers of meaning that reflect a Jewish way of thinking, and perhaps, consciously or not, his Jewish perspective that ideas are to be explored in the context of commentary. Like the Marseilles Bible and other Hebrew texts containing commentary, decoration, and primary text, his later works, such as Fun-Ex, contain visual clues to art history and history in general. What Bohrod did recognize is that the complexity of his images came from his view that "Painting, I believe, should always reflect and comment on life."



Aaron Bohrod (1907-1992), Fun-Ex, © the Estate of Aaron Bohrod Photograph by C. B. Rubin

Dealing with representation in documenting issues of our day, Amit Goren, the Israeli filmmaker and videographer, used the concept of simultaneity in his installation "Maps". In this work, a circle of monitors display the same video in a loop. But unlike traditional installations, the video is not showing the same imagery at the same time. There is disconnect in time, which, for the viewer, translates into a connection that transcends time. Videography is by nature (not withstanding inter-activity) linear; this circle makes each moment of the video into a commentary on another moment. Traditionally, stories are linear, told once. In the Torah, we find instance after instance of retelling stories, so that the juxtaposition of the telling is next to a different story each time. Goren, in his circle of video, has connected stories of immigration, displacement, and cultural lives simply by putting them next to each other.⁵



*Amit Goren Productions © Map, 2003
Four views of Six synchronized loop projections,
DVD 8 min., 28 sec.*

Mel Alexenberg addresses issues of context through his use unusually placed and juxtaposed installations. Sukkah, an installation for the Munich BMW Museum presented during the Sky Art International Conference, was not only was a political statement of outreach between an Israeli artist and a German museum, it was a juxtaposition of

⁵ Amit Goren Productions web site <http://www.amitgorenfilms.com>

traditions. Where other artists might rebuild one symbolic structure, Alexenberg melded holiday tradition with daily Jewishness, by putting flowing Tzitzit on corners of his structure. The decor became a symbolic embellishment, celebrating juxtaposition of place, traditions, and functions, and deliberately ignoring conventional scale.⁶



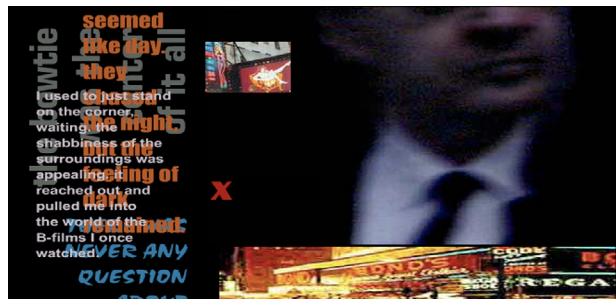
Mel Alexenberg, *Sukkah in Munich*
Installation the BMW Museum, Munich, Germany
Sky Art International Conference Exhibition ©1983

The French artist Frédérique Guétat-Liviani uses the symbols of word and everyday life in her work by embellishing gloves with words. As an artist whose work bridges poetry and visual art, she works with a self-conscious reference to Jewish thought and the tradition of words carrying meanings beyond the obvious. Her gloves make hands, a common Sephardic symbol, and she defines them as “art” by putting them behind a glass case, making them objects of contemplation. With a nod to Kabbalistic thought, Guétat-Liviani writes in her artist statement: “My work is very material. It is centered on the body of the letter falling out of the word, and subsequently, out of the garment.”⁷ Other works by Guétat-Liviani include a poetry scroll, referring more directly to Jewish traditions of presentation, but with content that speaks to her contemporary life in France.



Frédérique Guétat-Liviani, *Le vestiaire* © 2006
mixed media installation in Marseilles, France

Annette Weintraub takes the concept of multi-layered text into web works which recall epic theatrical presentations. As an American artist who does not consciously draw on her Jewish background, her work nonetheless displays a tolerance for complexity that is unusual even in the sphere of web works. Her 2000 work *Crossroads* is tribute to New York’s Times Square. The opening screen presents layers of text that scroll past image on the screen, as video unfolds within a beautifully treated and already layered still image background.



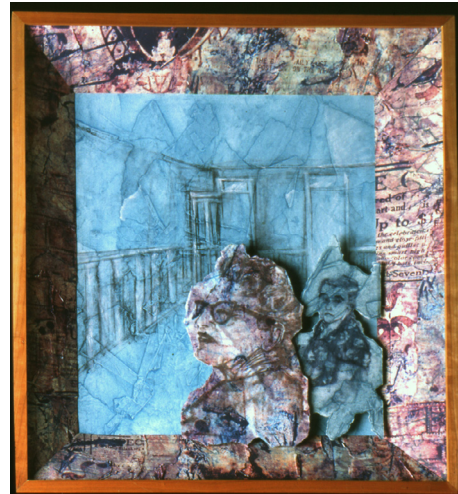
Annette Weintraub, *Crossroads*, ©2000
from: <http://annetteweintraub.com/crossroads>

6 Mel Alexenberg, email correspondence with the author, 2007
see also the artist’s web site, <http://www.melalexenberg.com>

7 Frédérique Guétat-Liviani, unpublished artist statement, 2007, translation by C. B. Rubin

Simultaneously, a voice recounts a nearly surreal narrative memoir. Commentary, image, and multiple text are all there together. Later works, including *Life Support* (2003) and *the Mirror that Changes* (2001) use moving layers of imagery, each one readable, but each drawing meaning from context as much as from representation.⁸

Reframing of imagery is also evident in the works of Naomi Ribner, another American digital artist who, like Weintraub, frequently draws on the subject matter of memory. Ribner’s still images, however, are more often centered on imagined personal recollections, and in this way unavoidably reflective of her own Jewish sense of family connections. Subject matter alone does not drive the works, in which representations of imagined characters are framed by bits of images that are so layered that they become textural more than pictorial, with an allusion to writing in the build-up of gestural surface. The textural collage found in Ribner’s work is both digital and physical.⁹



Naomi Ribner. © *Ghost Town Episode: The Sisters-in-Law*
inkjet prints, monotype, lithograph, collographs, pastel and charcoal



Maya, of Avignon
©2000 papier maché, printed matter, paint

Maya, a French artist based in Avignon, used bits of text and painted paper to build up shaped collaged works in 2000 series on the theme of Dervishes. Although she had studied Hebrew earlier, she created her first self consciously Hebraic work in 1990, for a group show entitled *Sacred*. By 1992 she turned to studying Hebrew once again, producing a number works revealing “my interrogations upon humanity and upon Judaism, my primordial need for an opening onto the Other and onto the World, and my own Spiritual Quest.”¹⁰ These works are embellishments of Hebrew texts, reworked into abstract forms that resemble swirling figures, and in which the illegible Hebrew serves only to remind us a written past and a tradition of text. The layers of meaning are turned inside out, as the text is commentary or embellishment of a collage of wonderful colors and textures which would attract the viewer in any event. Currently, Maya has moved into creating works based on her trips to countries such as Morocco and India where women wrap themselves in layers of garments, a series seemingly unrelated to the works of her many years of Jewish subject matter. That she moves easily from

8 Annette Weintraub, personal interviews with the author, 2004-2007
see also the artist’s web site: <http://annetteweintraub.com>

9 Naomi Ribner, personal interviews with the author, 2004-2007
see also the artist’s web site: <http://naomiribner.com>

10 Maya of Avignon, unpublished artist statement, 2000, translation by C. B. Rubin see also the artist’s web site: <http://www.maya-avignon.fr>

surface to subject matter a shift found among many artists, and brings her work closer to the North African idea that clothing is wrapping, that embellishment can also be concealing.

Georgette Benisty is a North African native who was influenced by French culture in her childhood, and who currently lives and works in the Boston area. Wrapped figures are collections of cultural legacies, reflecting layers of history and influence. As she says, “Always, I work out of a diasporal drive for connection and through my finished forms, gather disparate remnants into relationships imbued with belonging.” They are Jewish in their reference to experience, but they never cry out their Jewishness, rather they sing to the cultural melding, the cultural wrapping, that depicts experience.¹¹



Georgette Benisty, Wrapped Dolls ©2006

Personal Journey

As an artist trained to believe in the power of abstract painting, the impetus to explore my Jewish way of thinking overshadowed and preceded any interest in exploring specific imagery referring to Jewish history and memory. I came to identify the Jewish influences on my work slowly, building on my commitment to working in the contemporary American art scene.

Like others of my generation, when I was a young girl in the 1950 and 60s, my definition of art was limited to the narrow influences that we were all told were “Art”. First, I imagined that Degas and the other French male painters of his era were the only true artists. I had been introduced to what was then called Jewish Art in my religious school education, and I still credit the wonderful educators at my childhood synagogue (Temple B’rith Kodesh, Rochester) with encouraging me to feel comfortable with my Jewish identity as an artist. We all shared the idea at the time that Jewish Art meant Jewish subject matter, be it works by Marc Chagall and others alluding to the Jewish experience, or even more Biblical illustrations. This did not make the idea of Jewish Art very appealing as an area of artistic inquiry, and I simply rejected it all. Instead, as a student at Antioch College, I learned to embrace the ambiguity of Abstract Expressionist painting, taking particular notice of the complex “relations of relations” discussed by Hans Hoffman.¹² A German painter who visited the USA before the Second World War and then moved to the USA with the advent of war, Hoffman was not Jewish. He is, however, often credited with influencing a generation of American artists, including two Jewish women who became inspirational role models: Miriam Schapiro and Lee Krasner.

No one at the time thought of the confluence of the questioning, debating traditions of Jewish learning and the reactive processes of abstract painting, in which we

¹¹Georgette Benisty artist statement, <http://georgettebenisty.com>, accessed April 2007, and personal interview with the author, 2006

¹² Hans Hoffman, *Search for Real in the Visual Arts*, Sara T. Weeks, and Bartlett H. Hayes ed., (Cambridge: MIT Press 1967)

were trained to develop our own imagery through analyzing and reframing our marks and gestures.

The discovery of the tradition of Hebrew manuscripts, redefined as an art form, changed everything for me. In 1982, I stumbled on an exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York on Hebrew manuscripts. It truly was by accident, but at the time I had been working for many years with compositional structures borrowed from Persian and Indian manuscripts, another cultural tradition in which many elements are presented simultaneously. The singular image had long since lost its hold on me, and by the late 1970s I had already created a body of work consisting of collages incorporating my printed lithographic drawings of repeated forms derived from a seed pod, set against lyrical and colorful abstract little vignettes with the same basic source. When I began looking at Hebrew manuscripts, I did so not in search of my Jewish roots as such. I did it as way to break from the mainstream cultural norm of a more singular representation. I wanted to break from any dependence on the Renaissance picture plane, including the creative ambiguity that worked against the notion of a window onto the world.

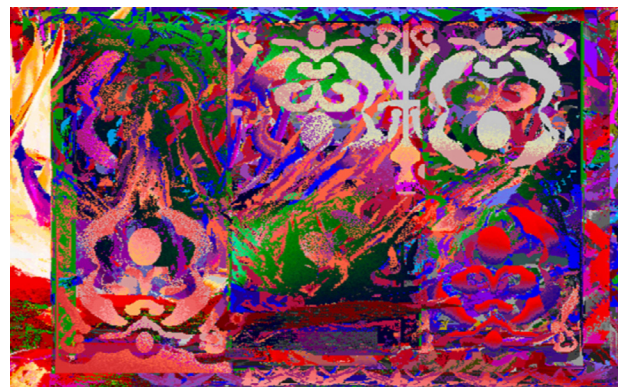
What I had found in Persian manuscripts was a different spatial quality, as well as the interweaving of text frames with pictorial representation. The Hebrew manuscripts carried these ideas forward, and my first paintings with the complex levels of interwoven information and decoration in the in the early 1980s set the stage for my first digital works in 1984.

I made a self-conscious decision to research and embrace the visual tradition of Hebrew manuscripts, which I responded to as an embodiment of the concept of presenting diverse forms of information simultaneously. Although my research into Hebrew manuscripts began in 1982, when I traveled to Europe to see a wide range of manuscripts, I have been most influenced by the Marseilles Bible, which I first saw in 1988, while living in Avignon. The Marseilles Bible today consists of two out of three volumes created in Spain in 1260. This Bible traveled to Safed with the Expulsion, and we know that in 1530 it was in a group of Mystics. After that, little is known about it until it was found in the Bibliothèque Municipale in Marseilles, France.

The carpet pages of The Marseilles Bible do many things all at once, both visually and in text. The Bible is decorated with motifs that quickly recall the influence of Islamic art, in carpet pages that can be seen from any angle. The chains of



*ms 1626, Bibliothèque municipale de Marseille
Photograph by C. B. Rubin*



*Cynthia Beth Rubin ©1998
May Marseilles Carpet Page*

micrography encircling the motifs are texts too small to read, meant as a conceptual embellishment that would inspire one to recall or study other related texts. As we turn the page, we see columns of the Text which is in itself open to many interpretations. Even on pages without illumination there are notes and references to other texts, creating a kind of hyper-text visual experience.

A few years after I began working with Hebrew manuscript motifs, I began working on the computer. Scanning was not a practical affordable option in 1984, and so I began working with interweaving motifs, including the strong reference to architecture found Hebrew manuscripts from France and Germany and the decorative use of nature as a form of embellishment. My first series on the Marseilles Bible, begun after my return to the USA several months later, was a celebration of the decorative motifs with little readable reference beyond flowers and other natural forms. The motifs set the context for the imagery, encircling it, pushing against it, holding it back. The images from this time are clearly two seemingly opposite references brought together: historical structures and flowing, colorful forms.

As I turned from painting to digital imaging, my career followed the path of the new medium. Reference to place came to my work only with the advent of easy scanning of photographs. Because the manuscripts used forms taken from architecture, it was easy to lift an arch from a photograph of a Provencal port to the Jewish quarter, and put it into a composition based on the Marseilles Bible that had a decorative arch. From there, the work slowly became increasingly about reference to place. Thus, the advent of the move to representation, to the direct reference to Jewish experience, came from a need to immerse myself in the Jewish visual tradition of complex structure. At some point I looked at the towers and arches in my work and noticed that these were about more than motif: they were about place, about places where there had been important Jewish communities.

For an artist who had been so committed to abstraction, the move to representation appears to be a major shift. By the 1990s, however, many of us began to acknowledge that yes, representation is powerful. And there it was in front of me – the power of history to evoke associations with lives outside of our own little worlds. This shift stands in opposition to those artists who create “Jewish art” as works of nostalgia for a small community. My



*Cynthia Beth Rubin ©1998
Trnava Synagogue*

turn to representation included a more universal approach to memory that was not limited to Jewish subjects. The same trip to Slovakia that produced “Trnava Synagogue” also produced “Old House in the Shadow of the Castle”, the first about an abandoned synagogue, the second recalls wandering around a deserted house near the castle where Marie Antionette spent her summers as a child.

Since my shift to digital art, I had always moved easily from still imagery to moving paintings (animation is not quite the right word), as well as to the inter-activity of web art. As my work moved more into images of memory, and more into the kind of representations that I had previously rejected because they drew power from the literal references over form, I decided to return to the Marseilles Bible.

Having lived in France off and on for years, I had the opportunity to photograph the Bible and to touch it. Given the complexity of the history as well as the visual impact of the Marseilles Bible, it was time to make a new work that was more than what a still image could give. For this, I turned to a collaboration with the composer (and rabbi) Bob Gluck. Our work Layered Histories: The Wandering Bible of Marseilles finally incorporated all of the elements: abstraction, representation, decorative cultural motifs, and sounds both culturally identifiable and abstract. The history of the Bible is suggested in 4 quadrants of image banks, two with somewhat readable images (from Toledo, and from other places where the Bible was or may have been), one of abstract images (derived from water, the primary means of transportation), and one of pages of the Bible itself, transformed into moving colors and textures. The shifts in the sounds parallel the shifts in the images, from allusions to liturgical Jewish music to voices from various countries.

The complexity of Layered Histories is solidly within the Jewish tradition of commentary and embellishment, reflecting the complexity of the Marseilles Bible as an actual artefact and as a conceptual legacy. The interface is a simple, direct reference to the Bible itself. The imagery, however, embellishes landscape with allusions to text (the text itself is never readable) and architectural spaces with water. Color and texture drip from every images, nothing is photographic, every surface is layered and embellished. Similarly, the music/sound, derived from recordings of voices with recognizable language, was modified by Gluck into intertwined layers of cords and rhythms that morph the words into sounds of humanity without direct meaning. And, in a moment of clarity after years of searching, Bob Gluck and I decided that the music/sound and the visual art should exist to embellish each other, but not be forced into a neat predictable pattern.



*Cynthia Beth Rubin ©1998
Old House in the Shadow of the Castle*



*Rubin & Gluck, ©2004
Layered Histories: The Wandering Bible of Marseilles
Jewish Museum in Prague Photo Archive*

In other words, we threw out the notion that specific sounds had to be attached to specific images, and went for the wonderful embellishment of meaning that occurs when conceptually similar elements come together in a more random fashion. The pieces are worked to function as one set of signifiers, but the rich embellished meaning comes from the juxtaposition, and we leave it to the viewer to experience the unity.

Conclusion

Is there Jewish Art? The question is ongoing, and shifts as we change our definition of art. When we reject notions of mainstream art that cultural identity is expressed in the Western Renaissance tradition of representation, and open the dialogue to include not only decorative ritual objects but decorated and embellished texts, both visual and aural, we are closer to a Jewish way of thinking. Even looking for a specific “Jewish” motif muddies the argument, as nomadic people tend to absorb some of the aesthetic of their surroundings. Rather than seeing this as diluting the culture, we can see the ability to absorb new motifs as yet another layer, another decoration, and another embellishment to the many meanings of culture.