

What is Jewish Expression in Art and/or Design?

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The question of whether there is any kind of Jewish visual expression immediately brings up the issue of defining the parameters of “Jewishness” in the field of the visual arts. It is my opinion that in this context everything that is related, either wholly or in part, to the Jewish cultural domain will be called “Jewish.” When dealing with culture, I ascribe to the approach of philosophers like Roland Barthes, who comprehend the view of culture as subjective.

In my view, Jewish religion is part of Jewish culture. Therefore, much of Jewish expression in art and design is closely connected to Jewish religion. However, much of that Jewish expression – and perhaps even more over the last two hundred years – is connected to Jewish culture, and not directly connected to religion.

One of the most striking expressions of Jewishness in art since the nineteenth century that is not of a religious nature is the notion of the Jew as victim. This notion gained strength during the twentieth century, and the events of the Holocaust served to intensify it even more. It would be interesting to look at expressions of Jewish identity as connected to the notion of victimization by considering works of two Jewish artists who often deal with this theme in their oeuvres: one is the Jewish American artist R.B. Kitaj, who has chosen to live for most of his life in London, and defines himself as a “Diasporist.” The second is the Israeli artist Moshe Gershuni. In the works of both of these artists, the national-ethnic element is bound up with the element of gender, from which stem their attempts to cope with the anti-Semitic stereotype that combines Jewishness with effeminacy. Kitaj presents the element of victimization as the product of living as a member of a political-ethnic minority whose main consequence was sophistication and intellectualism. Gershuni’s artistic works touch upon the cultural-historical roots of the state of mind of the victim beginning with the Sacrifice of Isaac, through the persecution of European Jewry throughout history including the period of the

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Holocaust, and culminating in the war-weary existence of the State of Israel. Through analysis of their works what becomes apparent, in addition to the similarities, are the differences that stem from their different backgrounds, which are connected to their views of themselves as, in the case of Gershuni, an Israeli Jew, and in the case of Kitaj, as a Diaspora Jew.

A third element that must enter into this equation is the work of the British artist Francis Bacon, who is not Jewish. Bacon's works also deal with the identity of the victim, which is bound up with the "otherness" that is related to gender. However, as opposed to Kitaj and Gershuni, Bacon deals with these subjects by drawing upon cultural notions that are Christian-based. In one respect, a comparison between the works of these three artists will help to sharpen understanding of the Jewish foundations of the notion of victim in the works of Kitaj and Gershuni. In another respect, this comparison will reveal, as well, sources that draw upon Christian culture that were assimilated into the Jewish culture of our times and expressed in the works of Kitaj and Gershuni.